Author: Nahuse
Illustrator: Gin
Environmental Artist: yish
Mechanical Designer: cell
Rebuild World III
Part Two
Invitation to a Bounty Hunt

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"Don't drag me down if you know what's good for you!"
"Sure, whatever."
Togami had gotten into Akira's truck because Shikarabe told him to. But the veteran hunter hadn't given him a reason—merely told him to shut up and comply. In his own mind, Togami placed himself on a pedestal, so he'd assumed there had to be some significant reason behind the decision. But his new partner didn't look skilled at all.
Rebuild World XVII

> Episode 003

Part Two Invitation to a Bounty Hunt

Character

> YANAGISAWA

One of Kugamayama City's top brass.
A mysterious man who also has secret ties to the nationalists.

> TOGAMI

A rookie hunter in Druncam, lauded as the "rising star of Katsuya's detractors."
His hunter rank is 27.

Rebuild World III
Author: Nahuse
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Part Two Invitation to a Bounty Hunt
The advanced civilization that once dominated the world crumbled to ruins long ago. As ages pass, the survivors have begun piecing together the fragments of its wisdom and glory as they struggle to rebuild their world.

"Ah, so that's it! I see now!
I just didn't have enough resolve!"

Rebuild World III

The advanced civilization that once dominated the world crumbled to ruins long ago. As ages pass, the survivors have begun piecing together the fragments of its wisdom and glory as they struggle to rebuild their world.

Part Two Invitation to a Bounty Hunt

Author: **Nahuse** Illustrator: **Gin**

Environmental Artist: **yish** Mechanical Designer: **cell**

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Chapter 86: The Mutants

Determined to strike it rich, Akira and Alpha decided to comb the desert for an undiscovered ruin. There, they happened upon the Yonozuka Station Ruins, a vast underground expanse with an abundance of relics and no monsters in sight—a veritable treasure trove. Pleased, Akira made a couple more trips to the ruins to collect the abandoned artifacts—first with Elena and Sara, then with Sheryl and her gang. Everything seemed to be going smoothly. But Akira had greatly underestimated how much hunters valued virgin ruins, and so became embroiled in a far larger struggle than he had bargained for.

One shady group of hunters kidnapped Sheryl in an attempt to learn more about the ruin. After Akira rescued her from their clutches, the existence of the ruin became public knowledge, and a massive conflict broke out between the hunters and behemoths who converged on the site. In its wake, the underground expanse was left utterly transformed.

Yet despite everything that happened, Akira came through it all unscathed.

During the fight, Akira unexpectedly encountered Yumina, and—even more unexpectedly—wound up aiding not only her but Katsuya as well. In the end, the two boys found themselves fighting alongside each other. Their time as allies was brief—but long enough for Akira to see how surprisingly capable Katsuya was in combat.

Now they were headed home. Akira lay in the back of Elena and Sara's truck, sleeping off all the exhaustion he'd accumulated. The battle within the ruins had been fierce, but thanks to Alpha's support and his newly upgraded gear, at least his life hadn't been in danger. If he'd gone in there with his old equipment and abilities, he would have certainly met his demise. His new equipment and improved combat skill had increased his strength exponentially—after all, he'd be fighting tougher battles going forward.

◆

Once Akira returned to Kugamayama City, Elena and Sara dropped him off at his home, where they said their goodbyes. Had he behaved more prudently, he would have first retrieved the relics that he'd sent on ahead to the city and then hammered out who got how much of the loot. Akira was friends with Elena and Sara, but they were all hunters nonetheless. They hadn't formed an official alliance, nor were they bound by a detailed contract. Neglecting matters like these now left the door open for tension between them down the line.

However, thanks to his trust in them—or perhaps feeling that even if they *did* decide to betray him, at that point there'd be nothing he could do about it anyway—he decided to shelve the issue for another day. In any event, he felt too tired to do anything about it now.

Moreover, he also wanted to believe that Elena and Sara were the type to act in good faith and refrain from doing anything untoward to a benefactor, let alone a friend. In that case, leaving the division of loot for later would likely pose no issues.

And so it was that, in mutual trust and goodwill, Akira and the women decided to call it a day and, with friendly farewells, went their separate ways.

◆

As Akira was letting his fatigue and remaining awareness melt away in the hot water of the bath, Alpha (who had joined him in the tub like always) lightly admonished him.

Careful, Akira. If you fall asleep here, you'll drown.

It took a moment for Akira to respond. "I'm good." He shook his head slightly to retrieve his consciousness from the water and rose up lazily against the edge of the tub. For some reason, the first thing that came to his newly restored mind was what had taken place at Yonozuka Station. "Man... Today was a full day, huh? What do you think's gonna happen to that ruin from now on?"

Most likely, it will continue to be explored and looted like any other. After all, with so many hunters flocking to the area, it can't be considered

an unknown site anymore. I do expect that this ruin will get quite a bit harder, though.

"Harder? Like how?"

Well, for starters, mutants will probably begin to crop up now that the monsters' ecosystem has been thrown out of whack.

Carnivorous monsters devoured not only human flesh but also other monsters. Some ecosystems provided more prey for them than others, and as long as a given ecosystem was stable, the types and populations of beasts in that area remained relatively constant. If something unnatural transpired and disturbed the balance, however, a number of creatures that hadn't been able to thrive in the previous ecosystem could rapidly appear, and mutants clearly deviating from normal growth patterns would arise. Currently, a swarm of beasts that normally wouldn't have been able to survive in the Yonozuka Station Ruins (or the area surrounding it, for that matter) were pouring from its tunnels. If a monster mutated as it adapted to the unfamiliar environment, then reproduced and spawned more mutants, it wouldn't be unusual for one—or many—of them to suddenly become very dangerous.

Furthermore, as a result of the battle between them and the hunters, the ruins were now full of sustenance for the former. As long as a monster had food, there was no telling how large and powerful it could become—but in the original ecosystem, some would've been devoured before ever having a chance to get stronger. Now those that had managed to escape natural selection, and that were undergoing rapid growth as a result of the food surplus and new environment, were at just as much risk of mutating.

Once the environment restabilizes, things will go back to normal. But it'll take a while, so we'll need to be careful in the meantime.

"Wow, that kind of thing can actually happen? Well, it shouldn't be a concern for us as long as we don't get too close to those ruins. Let's just take it easy for now. You know, stock up on ammo and sell the relics. Things should be calm again by the time we're done with all that." Then Akira sank into the hot water once more, turning his attention to more immediate and pressing concerns. When he finally did get out of the bath, he headed straight to bed to get rid of his remaining fatigue.

◆

After a day's rest, with his mind and body fully rejuvenated, Akira made his way to Shizuka's shop to sort out his equipment. The repairs on his truck were complete at last, so he had her move it over to the shop's parking lot. As he loaded the truck up with all the ammunition he'd purchased, he chatted idly with her about everything that had taken place in the Yonozuka Station Ruins. When he finished his story, Shizuka gave him a wry smile.

"You fought all those monsters on your own, Akira? That must've been tough."

"Yeah, it sure was! It would've been even worse without my upgraded gear, though. That really came through for me."

"As the one who sold you that gear, I'm glad to hear you say so. But how many times do I have to tell you to not bite off more than you can chew?" Shizuka chided him gently.

Akira grinned. "I know, I know. I didn't do it because I wanted to. And yeah, fighting off those monsters was tough, but it wasn't a desperate struggle or anything."

"Really? From what you told me, it sure sounded like one."

"Well, I did make full use of my DVTS minigun so I could win as easily as possible." His smile turned a bit rueful. "And, well, it may have been an easy victory, but I blew through a bunch of high-capacity magazines that cost me a fortune and used up a ton of ammo. So in that sense, yeah, I guess it *was* pretty rough." Akira had just bought even *more* of the magazines—enough not only to replace the ones he'd exhausted but to round out his surplus stock as well—and the back of his truck was packed full of them. His ammo had cost so much to replace that he'd be in real trouble if he didn't cash in soon on all those shelves that he, Elena, and Sara had brought back with them from the ruins.

An amused, teasing grin played about Shizuka's lips as she spoke in a faux businesslike tone. "Thank you very much for purchasing another lifetime supply of ammunition from my humble establishment. Your patronage is always most appreciated, Mr. Akira."

"It has been a great pleasure as always, Ms. Shizuka," Akira replied without missing a beat, returning her grin. They laughed together, and then Shizuka adopted her usual smile once more.

"So what's your plan from here on out, Akira? Going to head straight back to those ruins?"

“I’m gonna wait till I’ve taken care of everything here before I start worrying about what to do next. For example, I still need to make bank on these,” he said, pointing to several backpacks lying on the floor. Inside were the relics he’d collected during his previous trip to Yonozuka Station, and which had been transported back to the city ahead of his own return. When Elena and Sara had arrived back in town, they’d retrieved them from Kurosawa and dropped them off at Shizuka’s shop for Akira to pick up and exchange on his own later. Since they’d acquired the relics as a team, normally Elena would have sold them, and then they would have divided up the payout equally (minus expenses). But in this case Sara had already decided to keep the Old World undergarments for herself, so they had agreed that each of them should choose what to do with the remaining relics in their possession.

Shizuka looked a tad impressed as she eyed the numerous stuffed sacks. “In other words, you had the funds to buy that much ammo even before exchanging these relics? You’ve become quite the wealthy hunter now, haven’t you?” She grinned, then gave him a mild warning. “Climbing the ladder is good and all, but be sure not to let it go to your head. Otherwise, you might find yourself in a world of hurt.”

“Thanks, I’ll be careful.” Akira gave her a warm smile, grateful that he had people who actually cared enough to worry about his safety, however few in number they might be.

◆

After loading up his truck with the rest of the ammo and relics, Akira left Shizuka’s shop, returning home just long enough to unload a portion of his haul before setting out once more. Then he notified Katsuragi that he was on his way and headed out of town, driving across the wasteland until he reached a familiar place.

Yonozuka Station.

Katsuragi’s trailer, his mobile storefront, was already parked just outside the entrance. When Katsuragi noticed Akira approaching, he called out to him cheerfully.

“Hey, Akira, been expecting you! Looks like you brought me a ton of relics *this* time.”

“Yeah, a few, to be sure. It kind of seems like these relics have basically made a round trip, though, and I’m not sure how I feel about that,” Akira said, surveying the area he knew all too well with a grimace. Katsuragi laughed it off.

“Oh, c’mon. If it would help, you could always head on in there and collect some new ones!”

“Nah, I’ll pass on that. Don’t feel like it right now. Anyway, I’ve brought them all the way back out here for you, so do your thing.” Akira got out of his truck and unloaded the packs, piling them in front of Katsuragi.

The merchant’s grin grew wider when he saw how stuffed to the brim they were. “The bonus payout for relics collected within a newly discovered ruin’s already expired, so I’ve just been getting more and more common junk lately. These, however, are from when the Yonozuka Station Ruins were still a new discovery, so I’m *very* much looking forward to seeing what you’ve brought me today.”

◆

News of the ruin’s ghost of the Old World had spread, and as a result the general populace had come to know the site as Yonozuka Station, the name she’d used for it. Not even a week had passed since the ruin’s existence had become public knowledge, so a number of experienced hunters were still exploring its depths. Katsuragi, seeing his opportunity to make a killing, had taken advantage of having a traveling store to set up shop right at the entrance. Then he’d reached out to his acquaintances and gotten them to set up more shops, creating a small exchange area that allowed for more efficient handling of relics. It was just as convenient for the hunters as well—if they could sell relics and restock ammo nearby, they wouldn’t have to waste time heading back to town. And because many of their customers were willing to pay the marked-up wasteland prices for the sake of this convenience, the profits Katsuragi and his team raked in were well worth the risk of running a business in the shadow of the ruin.

◆

While waiting for Katsuragi to finish appraising his relics, Akira decided

to check on the state of Yonozuka. Zooming in on the ruin entrance with his scanner, he saw many vehicles, presumably belonging to hunters, parked around the area. No one was trying to claim the entrance for themselves now, since there was no longer just one point of entry. The monsters currently outside the ruins had dug their way out from the inside, creating new entrances and collapsed sinkholes through which to enter. That also meant that the monsters could come and go at their leisure, however, which of course made the outer area just as dangerous.

"You've got courage to set up shop in a place like this, Katsuragi. It's way more dangerous than the Kuzusuhara Ruins, you know."

"I'm aware of the danger. But the profit to be made here is something I just can't ignore. I have a store I can move wherever I want, and times like this are when it pays off the most."

Akira reflected. "Well, as long as you're aware of the danger, I guess."

Katsuragi's sales had skyrocketed compared to his usual figures, and he was in high spirits. But Akira's concern gave him pause, so he decided to probe a bit. "What, you're wanting to brag that you made it back alive from those ruins or something? It's not like you to be so conceited."

"That's not it at all. I almost *didn't* make it back," Akira said, a tad forcefully.

Seeing his reaction, Katsuragi became a bit concerned, and began to wonder if maybe the ruins really were more dangerous than he'd assumed. But he didn't let it show, keeping his upbeat attitude and grin as he grilled Akira further. "Really now? Just how dangerous are we talking, then?"

"Enough that after these relics get sold, I'm hightailing it out of here as soon as I can. In fact, if you hadn't decided to set up shop here, I would've stayed as far away from this place as possible. *That's* how dangerous."

"O-Oh, that so?" Katsuragi could tell from Akira's expression that he wasn't just being defensive and making things up. He knew how strong Akira was now, and his smile faltered slightly. "W-Well, like I said before, I came here fully aware of the risk. And we're pretty well equipped for anything here. I engaged several hunters to stand guard and keep us safe too. They were all capable enough to brave those ruins on the first day and make it back alive. So we'll be fine."

When Akira heard about the skill of the hunters Katsuragi's team had hired to protect them, he unconsciously imagined Elena and Sara, or

perhaps a group like Charlés and his team, who'd been unfazed by the conflict and had continued to retrieve relics as if nothing was going on. If it was someone like them, he figured, then they probably really would be fine. His relief showed in his expression, and seeing this, Katsuragi also felt reassured.

Then, as if right on cue, his bodyguards entered the market, having returned from their survey of the area surrounding the ruin. Katsuragi pointed them out.

"Hey, speak of the devil, they're here! It's these guys, Akira. I spared no expense to hire them, y'know?"

But when Akira saw who the guards were, a shadow of doubt crossed his face. Katsuragi noticed, and his own expression became one of uncertainty and suspicion.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing."

"If it's nothing, then why do you have that look on your face?"

Just then, the leader of the bodyguards approached and began making his report. "Squad Five intermittently reporting in as requested. We've returned from our patrol. All quiet. We'll be taking a short rest now, so—Huh?!" He broke off as he noticed Akira.

Katsuragi looked grimmer. "Friends of yours, Akira?"

"Let's just say I know them."

The team Katsuragi had hired to guard him was none other than Levin and his crew. They were indeed hunters who had survived the tumult on the first day of exploring Yonozuka Station—so Katsuragi's description, strictly speaking, hadn't been wrong.

◆

When Katsuragi heard Akira's account of how he had become acquainted with Levin's team, he was unable to maintain his trademark merchant's smile any longer.

Damn those swindling intermediaries! "Experienced hunters," my ass! They may have survived those ruins, but that's all *they did!*

Naturally, Katsuragi would've preferred hunters capable enough to survive the ruins on their own. Based on Akira's story, the intermediaries

he'd dealt with earlier hadn't necessarily been lying, but they clearly hadn't been telling the whole truth. Even if he went and confronted them about it now, they would be certain to play dumb. And from the way Levin and his group were acting, they were likely also complicit, so he didn't expect them to fess up either.

Shit, I've been had. Dammit! They've played me for a fool!

Had Akira not shown up, the merchant would have had no idea he'd been duped into employing novice-level hunters to guard him for an exorbitant price. The more he thought about this, the more his frustration mounted. But he was in the middle of business, so he suppressed his dissatisfaction for the moment and focused on appraising Akira's relics. If he lost his temper at Akira, he might lose one of his best customers. He glowered in silence, trying to think of a way he could get compensation, even as he continued evaluating each relic thoroughly and carefully.

"Akira, these are the relics you racked up on the first day of exploring those ruins, yeah? Shouldn't you have more than this?"

"Well, there were some kinds that you said you weren't interested in, so I left those out."

"Oh, that so? You know, I mentioned this earlier, but I'm always looking for new exchange routes, right? And as it happens, I found that clothing relics are actually a pretty lucrative market." Katsuragi spoke carefully, concealing his true aim under the guise of making small talk. "Not that anyone ever really brings me clothes anyway, so it's not like I want to make them a main trade of mine or anything."

Now that he'd laid the groundwork, Katsuragi took the next step. "That being said, if it's for you, Akira, I'd be willing to make an exception and take those relics off your hands. We're practically best friends at this point, so I'll do my best to give you a good deal." Subtly framing it as a favor from a friend, Katsuragi spoke casually, as if his proposition was no big deal. "Of course, exchange routes aren't built overnight, and it'll take a lot of time and effort. I'll have to go through more wholesalers than usual, so I might have to buy them from you at a *slight* discount, but hey, it's better than having those relics just take up space in your house, right?" He gave his best merchant's smile in order to mask his true intent.

"And what'd be in it for you?" Akira replied. "Nah, I'd rather not. I already have two other places I can go to sell clothing, so I'm gonna bring

them there instead. Besides, I'd hate to ask any more favors of you on top of the thing with Sheryl."

"That so? All right, suit yourself." Depending on the buyer, clothing relics could be sold for incredibly high prices. Katsuragi had been hoping to get Akira in his debt so as to obtain these valuable relics on the cheap. With this in mind, he'd employed a bit of trickery back when he'd been teaching Akira the ins and outs of trading in relics, and he'd figured it had worked. Akira had been unfamiliar with relics to begin with, and Katsuragi had intentionally given him information that would warp his perception in Katsuragi's favor. All that was left was for Akira to agree to Katsuragi's deal.

But now that Akira had found a different avenue of exchange on his own, the merchant's plans had all fallen through. Even as he maintained a nonchalant attitude on the surface, Katsuragi secretly clicked his tongue in irritation.

Based on his expression, I doubt Akira saw through my plan or anything. I'd supposed he'd think it a nuisance to look for other buyers and wouldn't bother, but I guess that's what happens when you assume. Damn, it's a no-go, then. He'd also wanted to recoup some of his losses incurred through hiring Levin's group, so missing out on this deal was even worse for him than it would have been otherwise. Unconsciously, he sighed more deeply than usual.

"Akira. You're gonna leave as soon as these relics get sold, right? If that's the case, why not browse my wares for a bit while you wait? You'll have a lot of money after this is done, so feel free to grab whatever strikes your fancy. Buy enough stuff, and I'll give you a bonus."

Seeing Katsuragi's offhand, rather defeated attitude, Akira finally lowered his guard. He would need to replenish his supply of medicine, after all. "Sure. All I gotta do is buy?"

"If you buy *enough*. I'm hoping you find plenty you like." But contrary to his words, the expression on Katsuragi's face didn't look very hopeful at all.

◆

Rows and rows of guns, ammunition, and other trinkets indispensable to

hunters lined the inside of the trailer that Katsuragi called his mobile shop. While browsing the vast inventory, something curious caught Akira's eye, and he stopped in his tracks. It was a relic storage bag of the sort that Sara had recommended during their last excursion.

I'm gonna get one of these. Uh, let's see... Looks like there's all sorts. This one's for precision machinery, this one's waterproof, this one's bulletproof, this one's electricity-proof, this one absorbs impact... Alpha, which one of these do you think would be best?

The optimal choice would be to buy them all and use them as the situation requires, but if that's too much of a hassle, it might be best to purchase a basic one for now.

There's all kinds of basic ones too, though.

Then you won't know the subtle differences between them until you try each one out, I guess. They're not particularly unwieldy, so just choose one at random.

Guess that's the only option, huh? Akira selected one and placed it in his shopping basket. Prices greatly differed depending on whether the items were consumable or reusable, but thanks to Akira's warped view of money, they all seemed to cost more or less the same to him. Without even looking at the price tag, he'd decided to buy a bag he really had chosen at random. In a way, perhaps being able to choose without having to worry about money was proof of Akira's growth as a hunter.

He continued browsing the products on display. *Waterproof spray? "Protect your weapon from rust. For a limited time, we'll throw in an impact-absorbing version at no additional charge!" Hmm...*

Some of these don't work with the materials in certain guns, so let the buyer beware, Alpha warned. *If you want these, it would be better to buy them at Shizuka's along with your gun repair tools so you can ask her if there will be any compatibility issues.*

That makes sense. Akira returned the product to its shelf and grabbed another nearby item. "*Jamming Smoke. Yuzumo Corp general purpose type A28. To check compatibility with your scanner, cross-reference the ingredients below with the specifications from your scanner's manufacturer." You think this'd be useful?*

It could lower the accuracy of your scanner to the point where my support wouldn't be able to compensate, or even have an adverse effect on

my *scanning ability. Don't forget that.*

I see. Guess I won't go for it, then. Akira returned the item to the shelf. Just as he was about to check out another aisle, Katsuragi entered the trailer.

"Akira, I've finished appraising your relics. Bought enough yet?" When Akira showed Katsuragi his shopping basket, the merchant gave an unsatisfied sigh. "I told you, you've got to buy lots to be able to get the bonus, so stop looking at these cheap trinkets and go for the pricey stuff. Look, there's a whole row of nice guns over there."

"I don't need any more guns."

Katsuragi sighed once more. Then, in a resigned manner as if he'd already known it would be hopeless from the start, he gave a suggestion. "Look, I can give you twelve million aurum for the relics. But if you buy ten million aurum worth of goods from my shop, I'll add on another million to sweeten the deal. How's that sound?"

Akira looked at the contents of his basket. "How much is all this worth?"

"No idea. A far cry from ten million, though, I can tell you that much."

"Then maybe I should buy some additional medicine."

"You could fill that entire basket full of medicine, and it would still be nowhere near enough."

"Nah, not the cheap ones on the shelf—those expensive ones I bought last time. The ones that are two million aurum a box. I didn't see them on the shelf, but I bet you have them, right?"

When Katsuragi heard that, his sulky attitude did a one-eighty. "Wait, you wanna buy another one of those?! You used it up already?!"

"A lot happened in those ruins, you know. I didn't use them all, but I'd like to have more on hand. If you have them in stock, I'll take five. That'll make ten million. If you don't have them, I'll have to pass on your bonus offer."

"W-Wait right there! I'll go check the stockroom right now! Even if I don't have any, I'm sure I can get some from a buddy I know. Don't go anywhere!" Katsuragi ran off, all fired up. Akira, however, couldn't have cared less and continued browsing the shelves as though nothing had happened.

◆

After managing to procure the requested items, Katsuragi wrapped up his transaction with Akira. The incident with Levin's team and his failure to rope Akira into his scheme had put him in a bad mood, but now that he'd received many valuable relics and a hefty ten million aurum besides, his attitude had done an about-face.

"Pleasure doing business with you. That'll even out the hit I took with Levin's group. Man, that's a relief!"

Akira looked at him curiously. "Something wrong with them?"

"What do you mean, 'Something wrong with them?' You were the one who told me you had to help those guys get out of the ruins alive, weren't you? So I paid a fortune just to end up with a bunch of rookies as my bodyguards. Of course that'd piss me off! Even you were doubtful when I introduced them earlier, right?"

Akira tried to clarify. "I only doubted the part about making it out of the ruins on their own. It's not like those guys are weak or anything."

Katsuragi looked taken aback. "Really?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, if we're looking at their overall specs, they could use some better gear, but the fact that they were able to escape those ruins in one piece without any powered suits is impressive enough in my book."

Akira wasn't especially jumping to Levin's team's defense, just giving his honest assessment. Katsuragi realized this, which was precisely why he seemed surprised.

"Wouldn't have expected those words out of *you*, Akira. It really was that dangerous in there, huh?"

"Sure was! I don't think *I* would've been able to survive without a powered suit, at least. It was only thanks to upgraded gear, my stock of medicine, and burning through ammo like crazy that I'm even standing here today."

At that, Katsuragi became pensive, his thoughts switching into merchant mode. *I bet the intermediaries don't know about the dangers of these ruins yet. Otherwise, they would have used them as a pretext to hike up the fee for hiring those guys even higher. Could I use this to my advantage?*

Akira, however, misread Katsuragi's serious expression. "So even if those guys were expensive to hire, I wouldn't necessarily call that a loss. And, well, if I'm being honest, you hiring those guys for a high price actually helps me out."

“Huh? How so?”

“They actually haven’t paid me in full yet for the emergency listing they hired me for. It’s not like I’m gonna needle them about it or anything, but if they don’t pay up, it’s gonna put Elena and Sara in a tight spot.”

Akira, Elena, and Sara had decided to recoup the costs from the Yonozuka Station Ruins with the reward money from Levin’s team, though the women had needed to convince Akira to go along with this. Since Akira had been busy rescuing Yumina and Katsuya, he actually hadn’t participated in guarding Levin’s team at all. So Akira had hesitated to accept the money in the first place, but Elena had asserted that because it was something they had accomplished as a team, they were all entitled to the reward. Akira, not wanting to risk upsetting Elena and Sara over something like accepting reward money, had agreed in the end.

However, Levin and his team didn’t have the capital to cough up fifty million aurum all at once. Even after selling their relics and their intel on the ruin and emptying their collective funds, they still hadn’t been able to cover the total bill and had ended up needing to pay the remaining amount in installments.

Furthermore, Akira’s team had to collect the money themselves. Even though the emergency listing had properly gone through the Hunter Office, the institution was only responsible for making sure the contract was valid. When it came to the actual collection of debt, they were strictly hands-off. Selling the debt to the Office had been another option, but Elena had put her foot down on that as well, saying that the Office would buy it at a heavy discount so they wouldn’t receive as much money, and it would leave a bad taste in her mouth besides.

Hearing this, Katsuragi’s business smile returned, wider than before. “Akira, can you tell me a bit more about this debt?”

“What are you scheming now?”

Seeing Akira’s wary expression, Katsuragi made an exaggerated gesture as if to say Akira’s doubt had wounded him. “Why, nothing at all! I was just thinking that I might know a way to get those guys to cough up the rest of the money they owe you real quick. We’re buddies, right? Think of it as a favor from a friend.” When the suspicion didn’t leave Akira’s face, Katsuragi gave a knowing grin. “Sure, maybe I want you to get richer so you can buy more stuff from my shop. But isn’t it a nuisance to have to go

out of your way to collect money from hunters? Being a merchant, I know this all too well."

Akira hesitated. "Well, I suppose."

"Look, if all goes well, it'll even ease the burden on Elena and Sara, won't it? All I ask in return is for you to buy lots and lots from my shop afterward. That shouldn't be too much to ask, right?"

Akira thought it over for a bit. The proposition would indeed benefit not only him but Elena and Sara as well. "All right, deal. What have you got in mind?"

"Excellent. Here's what we'll do." His merchant's smile brimming with anticipation, Katsuragi unfolded his plan to Akira.

◆

Once Akira had concluded his business with Katsuragi, he exited the trailer and headed to his truck, intending to leave the area at once. But then he noticed a commotion near the ruin entrance.

"What's going on?" Warily, Akira used the zoom function on his scanner to get a closer look. A crowd of hunters was pouring from the entrance as if fleeing for their lives, closely followed by a group of monsters. At first, Akira assumed that the hunters were fleeing from these monsters. But then his expression became tinged with caution once more.

Alpha, correct me if I'm wrong, but it doesn't seem like those monsters are going after the hunters.

True, the monsters *were* attacking the hunters in front of them, but only because the people were in the way. Those running on either side, and hence not impeding the monsters' advance, were passed by and completely ignored.

No, you're right, Alpha confirmed. *The fact that none of the monsters are stopping to devour their prey is proof enough. They seem too preoccupied with fleeing from something else to pay the hunters any notice.*

Then what are they fleeing from—? Even as Akira wondered, the answer appeared from the ruins. A gigantic snake—if it was a snake—with a torso over five meters in diameter burst out from the entrance, scooping a sizable crowd of the fleeing monsters into its enormous fanged mouth as it leaped forth. Its scales were a mosaic patched together from a variety of other

monsters' exteriors—from the scales of reptilian monsters to the fur of carnivorous mammals, to the shells of insects, to the armor of machines, every last creature the omnivorous behemoth had devoured was represented in its own skin. All who gazed upon it could see just how many creatures it had consumed—and just how powerful it was.

Akira grimaced. *What the hell is that?!*

Unperturbed, Alpha responded. *Like the gluttonous crocodile, it absorbs what it eats. It would've needed quite a lot of prey to get that big, but I imagine there was more than enough within those ruins.*

Doesn't look like a crocodile to me, though.

Such creatures don't necessarily have to be crocodiles to have that trait. That one was originally a regular snakelike monster, most likely.

Huh, is that so?

Once the giant snake had swallowed the mass of food in its gaping mouth, it immediately went on the hunt for new victims among the hunters and monsters nearby. Because it targeted the largest prey first, the running hunters were ignored for the time being, but once in their vehicles they wouldn't be so lucky. Tires screeched on the ground as the vehicles peeled out before all the large beasts lagging behind could be devoured.

Akira, we may be a considerable distance away, *but we shouldn't dawdle. We need to get out of here too.*

Oh, right. Returning to his senses, Akira's face tightened, and he leaped into his truck. Before he could drive away, however, Katsuragi flagged him down.

"Hey, Akira! You leaving me in the lurch?!"

Akira glanced at Katsuragi's trailer. He supposed a vehicle that large would be a prime target for the serpent.

"You need to get out of here too, Katsuragi. Just look at that thing! You think you'll be able to continue doing business here with a creature like that on the loose?"

"That's not what I mean! I'm saying, if we're going to escape, shouldn't we go together?!"

"Fine, but just remember if you want me to be your bodyguard, it'll cost you." Akira gave Katsuragi a stern look. The merchant, who had indeed been planning to rely on Akira's protection for free under the pretext of escaping together, flinched. But there was no time to negotiate the fee right

now, and Katsuragi could envision Akira leaving him behind if he thought the negotiation process too bothersome. So Katsuragi approached the issue from a different angle.

"Then how about this? In lieu of a fee for protecting me, I'll continue to cooperate with Sheryl. Sound good?"

Akira hedged for a moment. "Fine."

"All right, it's a deal. I'll be counting on you, buddy!"

Relieved, Katsuragi immediately began preparing to flee. After he explained the situation to his fellow merchants, they all formed a convoy of vehicles and began to move out. Akira and his truck took position at the tail end of the convoy. The monsters fleeing from the giant snake may have not been interested in attacking humans, but they wouldn't go out of their way to avoid something in their paths either. Akira was tasked with dealing with them from atop the truck.

With his truck set to "automatic drive" (which was actually just Alpha taking the wheel), he loaded a large magazine into his DVTS minigun and began picking off the monsters approaching the convoy from behind. Showered with countless bullets, the wounded animals either collapsed to the ground or fell back. Akira and the others just wanted to escape, so there was no need to kill the beasts—just fire every now and then to keep them at bay.

One wounded monster, angered at being shot, charged forward. With a burst of concentrated fire, Akira pulverized it. The unrelenting spray chipped away at its tough skin and bulging muscles—each individual hit only wounded it slightly, but the hail of bullets from the minigun made short work of the monster, shredding its body down until it fell still.

At that moment, the minigun ran out of ammo—the large magazine had been depleted. A bit surprised, Akira quickly began reloading.

Already empty? That magazine was huge, but I guess since it was a standard variety, I went through it just as quickly.

That's a minigun for you, said Alpha. *If you don't use extended magazines with those, you'll be out of ammo before you know it.*

Even a small extended magazine contains much more ammo than a large standard, huh? No wonder they're so much more expensive.

They may be pricier, but I want you to use extended magazines from here on out whenever possible. There's a limit to how much you can carry, after

all.

Right. Then let's go ahead and use up the cheaper magazines in the meantime. Akira let loose his minigun at the approaching monsters without holding back, intent on burning through all the standard ammo stocked in his truck bed.

Nearly every single monster that drew near the convoy fell.

Once he'd secured some room for a breather, Akira turned his gaze toward the ruins. He saw the gigantic serpentine figure in the distance. By now they were far enough away that, to the naked eye, it already appeared much smaller than before.

But Akira frowned in suspicion. He zoomed in on the snake once again, and the crease in his brow deepened.

Alpha, did that snake somehow, um, get even bigger?

The diameter of its torso is twice as large as before, to be precise, she replied. *Since it's outside the ruins, it's no longer limited to narrow pathways and seems to have adapted its body to its new surroundings.*

That's all it takes for a monster to grow? As the convoy continued toward Kugamayama City, Akira stared in astonishment at the behemoth serpent rampaging in the distance—an incomprehensible existence that breached the limits of his common sense.

◆

When they finally reached the city, Akira was about to head home, having fulfilled his bodyguard duties. As he turned to leave, however, Katsuragi called out to him.

"Thanks a bunch, Akira! You really saved my bacon back there. You really are strong, you know."

"Then show your gratitude by paying me what I'm worth."

"All right, all right, fine! And as a bonus, like I said, I'll cooperate with Sheryl to the best of my ability. After all, we're buddies, right? Relax, I've got your back!"

Katsuragi was acting awfully chummy toward him. While Akira found this a bit strange, he figured it was just the amiability the businessman showed all his customers, and didn't give it too much thought.

"I'll hold you to that, then. See ya!"

As Akira walked away, Katsuragi watched him depart, his merchant's smile still plastered on his face. Then he turned that smile onto Levin and his team nearby. "Good work to you guys as well! Man, that was quite the commotion, huh? Thanks to your skills, though, we made it back in one piece. Honestly, I'd like to throw in an additional bonus as a token of my gratitude, but since the contract was made through intermediaries, that would get complicated. Sorry about that."

Levin was a bit taken aback, stunned that Katsuragi would hold his team in such high esteem. "R-Really? If you could let the intermediaries know how we did and put in a good word for us, that'd be a big help. If we receive a high evaluation from one of our clients, that'll give us more leverage to negotiate our hiring fee through the middlemen."

When he heard that, Katsuragi gave Levin a knowing grin. "Oh yes, I'll be sure to tell them. I'll tell them that you did your best—for a team that had to put up an emergency listing and hire someone else to get you out of the Yonozuka Station Ruins alive."

Levin spluttered, which told the tale in more ways than one, but he still attempted to save face. "We only do the jobs the intermediaries refer to us. Whatever deal you made with them, we're not responsible for it." This wasn't technically a lie, but Levin and his team were fully aware that they'd been party to an attempt to whitewash the truth, and their faces stiffened.

Seeing that, Katsuragi deliberately gave them a warm smile. "Look, I get it, guys. Don't worry, I'm not upset or anything. Whatever the circumstances, the fact remains that you really did give it your all trying to protect us alongside Akira."

"R-Really?"

Katsuragi maintained a significant silence. The hunters began to feel restless. Then Katsuragi's gentle expression grew pitying.

"I suppose you guys must have it rough too, huh? In debt to Akira, of all people. He told me all about it, you know? Says you haven't fully paid him what you owe for the emergency listing yet. You best take care not to get yourselves killed."

"K-Killed?!"

"Me and Akira are like best buds, so I know him well. He comes from the slums, so naturally, he's used to taking lives. In fact, just the other day three hunters tried to lay their hands on his woman, and he ended up

slaughtering ’em all.”

Levin and the others blanched.

“Oh, and those guys weren’t failed ex-hunters or anything either. They all wore powered suits like it was no big deal, and I heard there was even one whose gear deflected minigun bullets. But Akira snuffed them all without batting an eye.”

Whatever color had remained in the hunters’ faces now drained completely.

“So you better watch out, got it? People from the slums tend to have rough childhoods and all that, so they hate to be underestimated. If he gets the idea that you’re not paying because you think he’s not worth it, he’s liable to come after you all, consequences or remaining debt be damned.”

“N-No, wait a sec! We’re in debt to a hunter named Elena, not him!” Levin managed to reply, trying his best to mask his anxiousness.

But Katsuragi merely shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. The reward money for the emergency listing will go to Akira as well, since they acted as a team. And it doesn’t change the fact that the reward has yet to be paid.” Here, Katsuragi made a show of looking slightly troubled. “And what’s more, even Elena and her companion aren’t exactly lenient when it comes to that sort of thing. You’d do well to not underestimate those two either. In fact, they accepted an emergency listing of mine once in the past, and whew, that was a rough one! If things hadn’t gone in my favor, I would’ve ended up bankrupt!”

Katsuragi spoke candidly about the past, and seeing that he’d stirred up more anxiety and restlessness among the hunters, he chuckled to himself.

“Well, anyway, just watch your backs, guys. Frankly speaking, your gear could use an upgrade, but you can all hold your own in a fight, at least. I’d hate to see talent like yours go to waste just because you got killed for a stupid reason like failing to pay a debt. Anyway, see ya round!”

Just as Katsuragi was about to turn away, Levin interjected in a panic. “Wait, don’t go just yet! You really think just ‘watching our backs’ will be enough?! That’s only gonna make us more anxious, and there’s no way that’s gonna solve our problem!”

“Maybe so,” replied the merchant, “but what do you expect me to do about it? I’m sorry, but if you’re expecting me to add enough to your reward money to resolve your debt, forget it.”

“I-I’m not asking that much. B-But there’s gotta be something we can do, right? You said you were best friends with that guy, so can’t you pull some strings or something?”

Without letting his true thoughts or feelings show, Katsuragi put on a grim expression. “If I’m being perfectly honest, I’d rather not get on his bad side myself. You guys already know how strong he is. I understand you’re in a tight spot, but don’t ask me for the impossible.”

“Can’t you give us a hand, please?! Y-You said you wanted to give us an additional bonus earlier, didn’t you? And that we can hold our own in a fight? Having promising hunters like us in your debt can only work out in your favor, right? We’ll exclusively buy from your shop from now on, so we’d like you to help us out—somehow—if you can. Please?!”

“Hmm, I dunno...” After pretending to mull it over for a bit, Katsuragi spoke the words he’d already prepared in his head beforehand. “In that case, how about converting the debt over to someone else? In other words, you guys would only have to pay the reward fee for the emergency listing, and without having to fear for your lives. Your debt to Akira’s team would disappear, and so would your worries.”

“Converting the debt?”

“Sure, I’ll do you a favor and handle refinancing your debt. But only under several conditions. After all, I’ll be loaning to hunters, and hunters aren’t guaranteed a tomorrow in their line of work. As a result, the conditions are a bit steep, so be prepared.”

The hunters all looked grave and distraught. Then Katsuragi delivered the coup de grâce.

“And I do owe you that bonus I mentioned for today’s job, so I’ll refer you to a financier and negotiate with them for you. It’s merely an option, so don’t feel like you have to take it, but do keep in mind that’s all the help I can offer. Now, what’s it gonna be?”

Levin and his team were out of options and had no choice but to accept. Katsuragi was well aware of this as he pressed them for a decision. And just as he’d counted on, the hunters agreed to his terms with equal resignation and hope in their hearts.

“Fine. It’s a deal!”

“Excellent. Then I’ll get things ready right away. One moment, please.” As he turned his back to them, Katsuragi pulled out his data terminal and

began to contact his merchant acquaintances, chuckling to himself all the while over how everything had gone according to his plan.

Chapter 87: Invitation to a Bounty Hunt

Akira decided to visit Sheryl, as he had pressing business with her. Kitted out as if heading to the wasteland, he left home and a short time later was parking his fully equipped truck in front of Sheryl's base. Sheryl came out to greet him, and they entered the building together and headed directly to her room.

She offered him a seat on the sofa, and he obliged. Just as before, she subjected him to her cuddling. Akira gave a small sigh.

"Sheryl, let's take care of business first. This can wait until afterward."

"Okay, fine." Sheryl gave him a pout, but her face quickly brightened with anticipation for later on. "Afterward, right? That's a promise!" She moved in front of Akira, facing him. "I assume this is about the relics we retrieved together?"

The spoils from the trip they'd taken together to the Yonozuka Station Ruins were still stored in Akira's garage. Much had happened since then, but Akira had decided it was about time to finalize how they were going to divide up the loot.

"Right. I'll cut to the chase: How much of it would you like? You ended up really going through the wringer because of me, so name an amount and I'll consider it. As long as you don't ask for everything."

Had they managed to retrieve the relics without a hitch, he never would've made such an offer. But since Sheryl had been attacked by Guba, who'd been trying to obtain information on the ruins, and several of Sheryl's gang members had even perished in the process, involving Sheryl with the newly discovered ruin had done her far more harm than good. If the events hadn't had any connection to Akira (like fallout from a mere squabble in the slums), then the boy would've just said, "Sorry about your luck," and left it at that; but none of this would've happened if Akira hadn't invited Sheryl and her gang on the expedition in the first place. Even someone like Akira could more or less tell that by roping her into it, he'd caused her to suffer. So he wanted to make things right by showing that he

was open to compromise.

But Sheryl just shook her head. “No, I’ve got nothing. I leave it up to your discretion. Even if you take it all for yourself, I don’t mind.”

Of course, Akira thought that would be too unfair in his favor, and he found himself doubting Sheryl’s words. He responded, a bit puzzled, “Huh? Isn’t that a little too irresponsible? What if I really said, ‘Okay, then I’ll be taking it all. None for you!’? What would you do then?”

Sheryl gave him the most sincere smile she could. “Well, in that case, I guess I’d be happy that I could pay back even a little of what my gang and I owe you for everything you’ve done. It wouldn’t be anywhere near enough to repay that debt, though.”

The way Sheryl saw it, Akira had collected the lion’s share of the relics himself. Rather than obsessing over the minor part she and her gang were entitled to and, in the worst case, risk getting into an argument with Akira, she felt it would be more efficient to use this opportunity to pay back some of the debt she owed him by letting him have it all. Even if she did negotiate with him and manage to secure all of the goods for her and her gang, it would all be for nothing if that meant breaking ties with Akira. It was obvious which she would choose.

But since Akira had no way of knowing any of that, her words merely stirred something within his heart, and his expression unconsciously softened.

Sheryl saw this and turned a mischievous grin on him. “That said, if you feel charitable enough to send some my way, I won’t refuse. I need money to keep this place going, after all.”

Akira grinned back. “Yeah, I’d imagine.”

“So yeah, I’m leaving it up to you. I’d like it if you went easy on me, though.”

Up to this point, Akira had been seriously agonizing over how they were going to split the loot, but now that he’d heard Sheryl’s stance on the matter, he felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Relieved, he suddenly had an idea. “If that’s how you feel, I just thought of another favor you could help me with. How about you be the one to sell the relics?”

“You want *me* to?”

“Yeah. Not just your share—mine too, and all the others. I’d really appreciate it.” The relics that he hadn’t been able to sell to Katsuragi were

currently gathering dust in his home. He'd have to do something with them eventually. Of course, he'd like to exchange them for money if he could, but since Katsuragi had refused to buy them, he doubted the Hunter Office exchange would give him a fair price. If he piled the Office's exchange tray high with various Old World accessories and only got a hundred aurum out of it in the end, it wouldn't even be worth the effort to bring them there.

But finding a proper place to sell those relics would be a pain in itself, so he'd been wishing for some convenient, easy way to exchange them.

"Look, you've sold sandwiches before, and there was that work you did back in the ruins, so I feel like you're plenty capable. If you could do me a favor and use those skills to make bank on the relics, that'd be a huge help." He paused, then added, "But well, it's just a favor, so if you can't do it, don't worry about it."

Since it was a request from Akira, Sheryl couldn't possibly refuse. However, in this case, she couldn't immediately accept either. "Since it's you, I'd really like to say yes, but didn't you plan on selling those relics to Katsuragi? Isn't that going to pose a problem?"

"Actually, I'd like you to handle that as well. Like, say, if you could do the negotiating with Katsuragi instead, that'd help me out a lot. He just told me he'd continue to make every effort to cooperate with you as a reward for me keeping him and his friends safe, so it should go well."

Sheryl gave a firm nod. "Well, if Katsuragi himself said so, then fine. I'll do my best."

"Thanks. I'm counting on you."

Akira felt in a good mood. He'd been worried that unsold relics would continue to accumulate in his home until they buried him, but now he could rest easy. Meanwhile, Sheryl was inwardly doing a jig, thrilled that an opportunity to become useful to Akira and strengthen their relationship had finally presented itself.

Both of them felt that they'd had a satisfying, productive conversation. In truth, however, there had been a small misunderstanding between them. When Akira had asked Sheryl to sell the relics, he'd simply meant she would cash them in. But Sheryl thought he'd asked her to launch a new business venture. If at this point they'd taken the time to discuss the finer details of the request, the misunderstanding could've been resolved instantly.

Sheryl, however, decided to leave the particulars for later. “It’ll take a while to get everything all planned on my end, so how about leaving the rest for another day?”

“Sure.”

Hearing that, Sheryl’s grin widened as if to say, “You promised!” Aloud, she asked, “Then we can call today’s business concluded, correct?”

Realizing his mistake too late, Akira gave a wry grin. “Go ahead. Do what you like.”

“Thank you!” Elated, Sheryl stood up, sidled up next to Akira on the sofa, and began cuddling him once more. While he did find this relationship of theirs rather peculiar, he nonetheless let Sheryl do as she pleased until she was satisfied.

◆

With that matter taken care of, Akira headed out to the wasteland, eager to resume his hunting duties once more. This time, he was on the lookout for more undiscovered ruins. It was now evident from the discovery of the Yonozuka Station Ruins that he could use the information from the Lion’s Tail data terminal to reliably find more abandoned, unexplored areas. The events at the Yonozuka Station Ruins might have been a mess, but they’d also netted him a tidy profit. Akira was keen to discover more and determined to make things go much smoother this time.

Just as, with renewed resolve, he was about to put his foot on the gas and peel out of his garage, Alpha called to him from the back seat.

Akira, you’ve got a notice from the Hunter Office.

When Akira checked the notice on his data terminal, he looked puzzled.

“Announcement: New monsters have been added to the bounty list.” Wait, what?

The Hunter Office kept a special listing of monsters designated as bounties. These were completely different from the ones for normal monster hunts—far more difficult, but also far more rewarding. Whenever an abnormally powerful beast was roaming the desert wastes, making it impossible for transports to pass between cities, the shipping companies would cooperate with each other, offering a hefty reward to anyone who would eliminate the threat. So every monster on that list was incredibly

strong.

The announcement had been issued to alert all hunters to the presence of these threats. For the weak and inexperienced, it served as a warning to not carelessly approach any designated bounty areas if they valued their lives; and for the strong, it was simply a signpost to their next pursuit.

Bounty hunts were also a prime opportunity for hunters to display their skills and get their name out there. When a monster was defeated, the bounty list was updated with the name of the hunter who had defeated it, and the kill was also recorded on that hunter's profile page on the Hunter Office website. Hunters who felled a bounty monster thus received a respectable sum of money, a boost to their hunter rank, and greater prestige and notoriety among their peers. Each time a new bounty was listed, many experienced hunters joined the hunt, hoping to gain these prizes for themselves.

Akira was looking over the data on the new bounty monsters the Hunter Office had posted: "Hypersynthetic Snake, five hundred million aurum. Tankrantula, one hundred million aurum. Multigun Snail, one hundred million aurum. Big Walker, four hundred million aurum." The areas in which they were generally sighted and even their pictures were also included.

He recognized the snake in particular.

Alpha, this "hypersynthetic snake," could that be—

Yes. It's the snake we encountered at the Yonozuka Station Ruins.

That thing's prowling through the wasteland as we speak? Akira grimaced, and after mulling it over for a bit, silently got out of the truck.

Akira, you're not going today after all?

Nah. If I go out now, I might get unlucky and end up running into that thing. On one hand, he figured he'd be fine if he limited his search to areas far away from where the snake was thought to be—but on the other, he didn't particularly feel like testing his luck, considering his track record.

Sensing this, Alpha flashed him a knowing smile. *Good idea. Your bad luck practically knows no bounds, after all. Let's call it a day.*

Akira sulked a bit at that comment, but Alpha had a point. Retreating back into the house, he spent the rest of the day training and studying in his room.

◆

Akira had decided to put his search on hold until the monsters had been dealt with. And yet he couldn't just stay holed up in the city forever, so he accepted several patrol jobs around the city perimeter as a way to keep his skills sharp.

He had his own vehicle, so there was no need to borrow a patrol truck, and to a degree he was able to choose his own route. As long as he steered clear of the bounty monsters' known habitats, the danger would be minimal at worst. Moreover, even if his luck betrayed him and he still happened to run into a bounty monster despite his best efforts, he could always get help from the city's defense force as long as he remained within the city outskirts. The defense force wasn't in the business of exterminating bounty monsters, but it would at least deter them from the city if they got too close.

By the time he was done with patrolling, he figured that surely someone had already taken care of the bounty monsters. As he drove along the bumpy terrain, he tried to shoot down a beast he'd encountered on his patrol from his truck bed. Wishing to hone his own skills, he'd opted not to have Alpha's support this time, but his accuracy was poor, and many of his bullets ended up hitting the ground near the target. Still, with the physical boost his powered suit gave him, he was at least able to maintain his posture as he fired. He slowed his sense of time so he could accurately sight the moving target, even as the truck shook him to and fro, and pulled the trigger again and again. One of his shots finally found its mark, striking the monster in the head, and it crumpled to the ground. Yet Akira's expression remained glum.

Took forever to actually hit it. Guess I'm still weak when I'm on my own, huh?

In truth, accomplishing what he just had would've shocked any hunter. He'd scored a bull's-eye on a distant, moving target from a vehicle in motion along a bumpy road—not something your average run-of-the-mill hunter could do. But in Akira's subconscious, the accuracy he enjoyed thanks to Alpha's support had become his standard, and anything below that now made him sigh in disappointment at his own incompetence.

Alpha flashed Akira a smile to cheer him up. *Don't worry, you've definitely gotten better! Don't get impatient—improvement will come with*

time.

Okay. If Alpha said so, perhaps his lack of skill wasn't worth beating himself up over after all. He grinned back at her. *By the way, Alpha, any developments on the bounty monsters? I figure at least one of 'em's bound to be down for the count by now.*

Akira had largely hesitated to go out to the desert because four bounty monsters were currently roaming the wasteland. If even one of them had been eliminated, that monster's location would now be a safe place for Akira to resume his search.

But Alpha shook her head. *Unfortunately, none of them have been defeated yet. The bounty list hasn't been updated either, aside from specific location details. Oh, and the reward amount's been raised as well.*

Huh. With the bounty starting at one hundred million aurum, I would've thought that some crazy strong hunters would've formed a team and ganged up on it by now. Wait, the reward amount increased? How much are we talking, Alpha?

Six hundred million aurum at the lowest. Oh, and the highest one is one and a half billion.

If Akira had been drinking something at the moment, he would've done a spit take. He'd assumed there would only be about a ten or twenty percent increase at most. *Th-That's a big jump!*

I'd say some of those crazy strong hunter teams you just mentioned set out to bag the monsters and got killed in the process. So the fee was probably increased to entice even stronger hunters into trying their luck, then those guys got wiped out, and so on until the bounties reached their current amount.

If so, then even the current reward amount might not be enough, Akira mused. *You're telling me monsters that strong are roaming the desert as we speak?* He felt less and less inclined by the moment to pay the desert a visit anytime soon, and he gave a small sigh. *Isn't there anyone out there with the skill to take care of those things already? It's not like they're in the depths of some narrow ruin—they're walking around out there in the open. Couldn't a hunter use a tank to blow them up or something?*

Hunters with tanks primarily reside farther to the east of here. They could be on their way here now, in fact.

Oh? Then should we just wait for them to take care of it?

Perhaps, Alpha said, *but to be honest, the chances of strong hunters like them coming all this way from the far east are slim. After all, it would be a wasted trip if the monsters were felled while they were en route.*

Guess that makes sense.

Still, she added, *if a long time passes and the monsters still haven't been taken care of, the reward amount might climb even higher, and that could give them the incentive to change their mind.*

Really? Okay.

But it's also possible that if the monsters aren't defeated in a reasonable time span, they could cause some serious problems, which might make it difficult to offer more reward money in the first place—

Alpha, he interrupted.

Hm? What's wrong, Akira?

By this point, Akira had figured out that Alpha was purposely toying with his expectations. But he realized now how pathetic he'd sounded when he'd suggested waiting around for someone else to take care of the problem, so he figured he deserved her teasing and didn't argue.

Nothing.

Well, then, let's continue our patrol, shall we? I see a monster over there.

Gotcha. Akira readied his gun once more.

◆

During his patrol of the city outskirts, Akira came across more hunters than usual. When he mentioned this to Alpha, she responded that everyone was probably thinking along the same lines as him—they were afraid of encountering a bounty monster and so were sticking to the city perimeter. What's more, since their income would take a hit if they stayed holed up in the city, they'd accepted patrol jobs just like Akira had.

I'm not really one to talk, but having this many hunters patrol the outskirts seems kind of pointless, he mused.

Not only that, more hunters means smaller rewards to go around. You'll be fine as long as you recoup the costs of all that ammo you bought, but other hunters would find it impossible to live on that income.

Another consequence of the bounty monsters, huh?

The sun was beginning to set, so Akira decided to call it a day and headed back to the city. Even on the way home, he passed many other hunters. When he reached the perimeter, he received an alert on his data terminal.

Akira, incoming call. It's from the Druncam hunter Shikarabe.

Akira searched his memory. *Who?*

He's the hunter who was with Elena and Sara in the underground of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins. The one who didn't get along with Katsuya, remember?

Shikarabe, like Katsuya, was a hunter belonging to Druncam. He'd served as supervisor for Katsuya and his companions when they were training, and since then had gotten along poorly with the Druncam boy. During the construction of the temporary base in the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins, it had been Shikarabe, Elena, and Sara who'd made up the first line of defense. Akira had seen the man's strength for himself during their time together there—the boy estimated that the senior hunter's skills were on par with Elena's and Sara's.

Ah, him. What does he want, I wonder? Akira had finally remembered Shikarabe, but he didn't particularly think of the man as a friend and couldn't imagine why he'd contact him, so Akira felt somewhat suspicious. Still, after a moment of hesitation, he picked up his data terminal.

"Akira here. What do you want?" Akira's wary greeting was distinctly lacking in politeness. But Shikarabe seemed to not mind in the least.

"Hey, Akira," he responded cheerfully. "It's Shikarabe. Been a minute, hasn't it? Got something I'd like to discuss with you, if you've got some time. What's your location?"

"I'm in the wasteland, near the city perimeter. Just heading back home. What's up?"

"Just the hot topic on every hunter's mind right now. Don't worry, it's nothing sketchy, and I promise it'll be worth your while. I've already discussed it with Elena and Sara too. But the details being what they are, I'd prefer to talk to you about it in person rather than over the terminal. I'll send you my location, so if you're curious, head on over. See ya!"

With that, Shikarabe hung up. Akira considered how to proceed for a bit before contacting Elena.

"It's Akira. Got a moment to talk?"

Elena's voice sounded cheerful as always through the data terminal. "Sure. What's up?"

"Nothing much. Just got something I'd like to ask you."

"If it's going to take a while, let's meet somewhere and talk. Want to come on over to our place? Sara's here at the moment too."

"Nah, this'll be quick, so no need." Akira then recounted his conversation with Shikarabe to Elena. After a moment's silence, Elena responded with her own conjecture.

"Hm, if I had to guess, I'd say he wants to hire you to help take down one of those bounty monsters. It's true—he did also come to us with a similar proposition. But the details are confidential, so I'm sorry, but I can't speak at length about it."

"That's fine, I don't expect you to. I was just curious what he could possibly want, since he contacted me out of the blue. But do you really think he'd want to hire someone like me for that job?"

There was a moment of stony silence from Elena, which made him wince. Then she continued as though she'd never paused in the first place. "You worked with Shikarabe back in the underground ruins, didn't you? He probably saw how capable you are there. Not to mention I wouldn't be surprised if the tales of your exploits in the Yonozuka Station Ruins have made their way to the rest of Druncam through Yumina and Katsuya."

"Hmm, you think?"

"Also, from a pride standpoint, if someone who rescued us from danger's going around putting himself down and saying 'someone like me,' how do you think that makes *us* feel?"

"S-Sorry," Akira reflexively apologized.

Elena continued in a tone which made him wince once more. "You're selling yourself short, Akira. Being humble is fine and all, but you're gonna tick someone off someday if you keep that up, or even antagonize them. So be careful."

Akira was accurately aware of how strong he was, to a degree. But whether that was his own strength was a different story. Thanks to Alpha's support, there was a disparity between how others evaluated him and how he evaluated himself. That disparity proved just how astounding her help had been—but the more he relied on Alpha's support and incorporated it into his repertoire, the more he realized how helpless he was without her.

“Since he went out of his way to contact you, I’d say Shikarabe’s also keenly aware of your abilities, just like me and Sara. So, Akira, have a bit more confidence in yourself, okay?”

They weren’t *his* abilities, though, he couldn’t help thinking to himself. They were Alpha’s. But rather than argue with Elena, he tried to dispel her concern, responding in the brightest voice he could muster, “Okay. I will.”

It didn’t escape Elena’s notice that Akira was forcing himself. But since improving one’s self-esteem wasn’t something that happened overnight, she decided this was fine for the time being.

“Now, back to the topic at hand, I think it’ll be worth listening to what Shikarabe has to say. But there’s also no guarantee he’ll offer you the same job he offered us, so listen carefully and trust your own judgment.”

“Gotcha.”

“And if he does try to rope you into a bad deal, you just let me know. I’ve basically been our team’s negotiator up to this point, so I’ll return the favor.”

Akira could tell she was joking, and grinned. “If it comes to that, then I’ll be counting on you for your services. All right, I’ll hear him out first, then go from there. Thanks, Elena.”

“Maybe we’ll even end up on the same job. If that happens, I look forward to working with you again.”

“Likewise. Well then, later!” Akira ended the call and gave a small sigh of satisfaction. Then he became aware of Alpha’s gaze on him. *What gives, Alpha?*

Oh, nothing. But before going to Shikarabe’s location, we ought to head home first. He’s at a bar in the lower district, and there may not be anywhere to park the truck.

Sure thing. I ought to let him know I’m coming too. Akira sent the man a short message saying he was on his way.

Meanwhile, Alpha was deep in thought. She’d determined that Akira would most likely accept Shikarabe’s proposal, for two reasons. First, and most importantly, Elena and Sara had accepted similar offers. Second, she knew Akira would never have gone to meet Shikarabe if Elena had told him not to. Whether Akira himself was conscious of this influence on his behavior, she wasn’t sure—but if Alpha asked him, he’d most likely become aware of it. Concerned that such an outcome might interfere with

her own plans, however, she avoided questioning him for now and kept silent.

◆

Elena was at home in her room, lounging in her favorite chair. It was a top-of-the-line product, designed to alleviate the strain of long work hours and comfortable enough to easily doze off in. Her attire was also maximized for comfort—apart from her terminal's headgear, she wore only her underwear.

Sara entered the room carrying a tray of food. She was dressed leisurely as well, with nothing more than a T-shirt over her intimates. The dangers of their profession meant they were always wearing body armor out in the field, so they found it rather cathartic to wear relaxing, comfortable clothing when they were taking it easy at home. At first it was something they'd deliberately done to mentally separate their personal lives from their work, but now it had become more of a habit.

They sat down to enjoy their meal together and chatted idly until Sara suddenly remembered something. "Come to think of it, Elena, I heard you talking to someone earlier. Was it Druncam?"

"No, Akira. Apparently he got a message from Shikarabe asking to meet up, and he wanted to discuss it with me." Elena then let Sara know what Akira had told her, filling in the gaps with her own guesses.

When she finished, Sara looked puzzled. "If it's a job for Druncam, wouldn't one of their headhunters contact Akira instead? Why would Shikarabe contact him directly?"

"Considering the internal conflict Druncam's facing at present, I'd say Shikarabe's scheming something," Elena mused.

"Scheming like how?"

"Well, despite Akira's skill, the kid's about the same age as one of their young rookies, isn't he? I think Shikarabe's planning to secretly slip Akira in with the rookie unit. Their newbies are still wet behind the ears, so adding his prowess would greatly boost the unit's strength during this hunt—and from the outside, no one would know they'd had extra help."

Sara nodded, but then looked confused. "Why wouldn't the desk jockeys contact him instead? Why Shikarabe?"

“Maybe by putting him on the bounty hunt, Shikarabe’s trying to prevent the desk jockeys from contacting Akira themselves for the time being.” Seeing that Sara’s interest was piqued, Elena smiled. “But this is all my own conjecture. At any rate, I told Akira to contact me if Shikarabe tried any funny business, so it should be fine.”

“Oh? Well, in that case, I won’t worry.” Elena was a negotiator, after all. If she said it would be fine, Sara thought, then it probably would be.

◆

The red-light district in lower Kugamayama was home to a variety of establishments that catered specifically to hunters. Taking lives was part of a hunter’s job, so they needed places afterward where they could unwind, drink their troubles away, and dull their consciences. Many would come straight to the bar still geared up from work, eager to spend the money they’d just risked their lives to earn. And since so many hunters flocked to this area to blow off steam, it was a sketchy, licentious part of town that regular folks typically avoided.

Naturally, there were plenty of prostitutes and brothels on the street—backed by an equal number of goons who hung out in the shadows, ready to rough up anyone who came too close. In other words, it was no place for anyone who couldn’t hold their own in a fight.

Shikarabe and his men were chatting it up in the very back of a bar typically reserved for the wealthiest hunters. There was alcohol at the table, but Shikarabe hadn’t had a drop. Dulling his mind with drinks would only make the upcoming negotiations harder.

His colleagues Yamanobe and Parga, however, were knocking them back one after another. Yamanobe had installed a device in his body that broke down any alcohol he ingested, and even from his most drunken state he could sober up completely within ten seconds. Parga had meds on hand that would eliminate the alcohol within his system. Personally, Shikarabe had some qualms with his comrades’ drinking habits, but since they weren’t letting it interfere with work yet, he kept his comments to himself for now.

His terminal notified him of an incoming message—Akira had written that he was on his way.

“Akira’s en route now,” Shikarabe informed them. “I’ll do the

negotiating. Don't either of you say anything unnecessary."

Yamanobe, clearly buzzed, grinned back in response. "I gotcha, I gotcha. Say, you really think this Akira fella's gonna be any useful?"

"He won't drag us down, at least, I can promise you that. What about you two? Who'd you get for us?"

Yamanobe answered first. "Well, I got two hunters up to their eyeballs in debt and one guy monitoring their every move. Their skills are decent enough. According to their creditors, it's fine if they kick the bucket, but they want the bodies recovered if that happens. There were several others I reached out to as well, but it's anyone's guess if they'll actually show up."

Parga spoke up. "I got two that want connections to join Druncam. One's skills are only a bit above average, and the other's a veteran hunter, more on par with us. I got several more feelers out elsewhere too. Waitin' to hear back from some intermediaries."

Shikarabe looked surprised. "If one of them's on par with us, they shouldn't need our connections to join Druncam. They'd just need to talk to the syndicate's headhunters directly." He considered a moment. "There's something more to it, I assume?"

"Apparently they had a falling-out with Druncam at some point, but now they're looking for someone who can give them an in. Dealin' with the syndicate itself ain't an option, looks like. I don't know the details, so you can ask 'em yourself when you meet 'em."

"Hm. Well, if they want our backing, we're gonna make 'em work for it, at least." Shikarabe had faith in his colleagues' judgment, so even if the men they'd recruited had a few skeletons in their closets, he figured that wouldn't pose any problems.

Shikarabe and his comrades were forming a group to hunt the bounty monsters. That was why they'd gotten in contact with Akira and the others, and this bar was their rendezvous. But they hadn't gone through official Druncam channels—and just as Elena had suspected, there were other factors at play behind the scenes.

◆

Akira made his way through the red-light district toward the bar Shikarabe had specified. It was a seedy area with minimum public security

—much like the slums, but for completely different reasons. After all, if a neighborhood flourished on the money that hunters had risked their lives for, it had to be bawdy enough to keep them reaching for their wallets.

For many hunters, then, this place was a reason to keep on living one more day. But the district corrupted and ruined far more of them, ensuring they would never see tomorrow.

Normally, Akira would have absolutely no reason to set foot in this area, so at first he gawked curiously at everything around him as hustlers cajoled him to sample their booze and women. But while he found their behavior novel, in the end he decided to ignore them all and pressed onward.

Then he noticed something else unusual—Alpha was going out of her way to navigate around the people she passed as she walked beside him. But as she didn't have an actual body, he couldn't help thinking that this was rather pointless.

Alpha, why're you avoiding everyone? *Nothing's gonna happen if you bump into them, right?*

It's a mood thing.

Mood? Like, your mood will worsen if you collide with someone?

No, your *mood will*, Alpha replied. *I wonder if you'll be able to see my figure overlap with this person here without pulling a face.* She approached a nearby hunter, deliberately overlapping her figure with his. Their combined faces became a freakish amalgam of haphazard features, and their bodies a four-armed humanoid abomination.

Akira did indeed pull a face. The sight definitely hadn't done his mood any favors.

Sorry I asked. Please don't do that ever again.

Told you. Alpha returned to Akira's side, a smug grin on her face.

The bar that Akira sought out was located in a tall three-story building. When he arrived at the entrance, he took a good look at the people around him and at the bar's clientele of hunters. The most conspicuous ones were fully kitted out, as though they'd headed straight here from relic hunting. Some were even carrying objects that could quite possibly be the relics they'd collected that day.

Akira was wearing his powered suit, armed with only his AAH and A2D assault rifles. He'd left his CWH anti-materiel rifle and DVTS minigun in

the truck, and he wasn't carrying his usual pack of spare ammo either. He'd trimmed down his arsenal because he was afraid they might turn him away if he tried to enter the bar with his usual relic-hunting kit, but he'd apparently been worried for nothing, considering how dangerous some of the bar's patrons looked. Still, compared to Stelliana, the fancy restaurant at the top of the Kugama Building—or to the threats he'd faced in the ruins—this place hardly fazed him, and he headed on in.

The spacious bar was packed with hunters drinking to their hearts' content. When the bar owner behind the counter saw him enter, he gave the boy a hard look.

"This ain't a place for kids like you. Go home." It was the proprietor's job to not only sell the hunters drinks but also defuse any arguments or fights that popped up when they'd had a bit too much. He spoke now to Akira in the same persuasive tone he used in those instances.

Akira, however, remained unruffled. "Tell that to the guy who called me here, then. His name's Shikarabe. Know him? He ought to be here somewhere."

The owner deduced from Akira's attitude that he wasn't just some kid who'd wandered in here by mistake, and so the boy didn't have to be shooed away for his own safety after all. Akira didn't look particularly strong, but the proprietor reckoned he probably at least had enough skill to justify wearing that armor.

"Never heard of him," said the owner gruffly. "Feel free to search around." Then he muttered under his breath, "Seriously, what kind of idiot sends a little kid to a place like this?"

Despite the man's grumblings, Akira now had permission to search, so he began looking around the bar for Shikarabe. But he could see no sign of the veteran hunter.

Where is he? Akira wondered. *Maybe I should call him.*

Before Akira could pull out his terminal, though, Alpha chimed in. *On the second floor, in the very back. Shall we?*

Akira wondered how she'd been able to locate Shikarabe when he wasn't even on this floor in the first place, but then he reminded himself that none of Alpha's feats should surprise him at this point.

Second floor, you said? All right, let's go.

Before he'd met Alpha, Akira hadn't even been able to read or write. But thanks to her lessons, he'd learned about a wide variety of subjects—and studied even more through the net, now that he knew how to use it. There were still some gaps in his general knowledge, of course, but he'd come a long way from the days when the back alleys of the slums were the only world he knew.

Yet the more Akira learned about the world, the more he realized what an utterly bizarre being Alpha was. But to Akira, her true identity didn't really matter—as long as she was on his side, he didn't care if she was using him for her own goals.

So he chose to focus instead on what mattered to him. Why open a can of worms that didn't need to be opened? Why risk ruining the luck he'd had in meeting her that fateful day—risk losing his precious daily life with her? He suppressed his curiosity and doubt and headed up the stairs.

Just as Alpha had said, Shikarabe was on the second floor of the building, in the very back. When he spotted Akira, he waved him over.

"Hey Akira, over here! Glad you made it!" In the back of the room, a large table stood in front of a long, U-shaped sofa with enough room for the bar's hostesses to sit beside their guests. At the moment, however, the only ones seated there were Shikarabe and his comrades.

“These’re my colleagues, Yamanobe and Parga,” Shikarabe began when Akira approached. “Guys, this is Akira. Go on, have a seat, Akira.”

Akira felt the curiosity and doubt as the two hunters gazed at him, but he paid them no mind and sat directly opposite Shikarabe. “So what’s this all about?” he asked.

“Ah, before we get to that, you hungry? Wanna order some food? This might be a bar, but they’ve got all sorts of stuff besides appetizers.”

“Until I’m certain this is a conversation where I’m able to relax and eat, I’ll pass. Also, I don’t know how expensive the food is here.”

Shikarabe, sensing that Akira wasn’t going to lower his guard, broke into a bold grin. “I see. Then let’s skip the formalities and cut to the chase, shall we? We’re gathering hunters to help us take down the bounty monsters the Hunter Office listed. Just to be sure, you familiar with the four bounty monsters on the list?”

“Yeah.”

“Now, if we just wanted to defeat them, the three of us could probably handle it on our own, but it’d be quicker and increase our odds of survival to have a larger group. So we decided to hire additional members to supply the firepower we need. Which is why I called you, Akira. We’ll make the pay worth your while. What do you say?”

Seeing that Elena’s guess about Shikarabe’s proposal was right on the money, Akira finally relaxed. “I’d say that depends on the conditions of the contract,” he replied. “But if that’s all there is to it, why couldn’t you have explained all that to me over the phone?”

Shikarabe looked grave. “Because I couldn’t tell you then what I’m about to say. I wanted to give you the whole story up front before you made your decision, not just half of it. Thing is, this job’s not available through the Hunter Office. It’s simply an offer from one hunter to another. I wanted you to know that before you accepted.”

Akira could tell from how the three Druncam hunters were acting that he was being told something critically important, but he didn’t see why it was such a big deal. With a serious expression, he asked, “And if I accept, what are the cons? Tell me everything you can.”

Parga interjected, giving Akira a dubious look. “Hey, hey, none of us here are rookies. We shouldn’t have to explain that to you, right?”

In fact, in most hunters’ books, Akira would still qualify as a rookie.

Akira shot Parga a wary glance and tried to cover for still being a bit green. “I typically work solo, so any customs or unspoken agreements when working together with other hunters are alien to me. Besides, I don’t work for Druncam, and I have no association with them whatsoever. Don’t expect me to know the ins and outs of how you guys do business.”

Yamanobe understood from this answer that there wasn’t any danger of Akira taking a Druncam offer instead, and grinned. “I see. So that’s what you meant.”

“Get it now? I’m sure you’re already aware, but unspoken agreements and stuff like that can breed arguments,” Akira said. “Let’s dispense with all that ‘I didn’t tell you ’cause you didn’t ask’ crap, ’cause I don’t want to have to duke it out with you later down the line.”

To a veteran hunter like Shikarabe, Akira sounded like he was merely announcing his naivete. But pointing that out might ruin the Druncam hunter’s negotiations and render the whole operation meaningless, so he moved the conversation along instead.

“Fine. I’ll go over them all, and if anything seems unclear, feel free to ask questions.”

When a job didn’t go through the Hunter Office, the Office was of course unable to verify its existence and wasn’t involved with it. So if Shikarabe hired Akira for this job, it wouldn’t show up in the latter’s job history on his official profile page. And since, according to the Office’s records, the job effectively didn’t exist, the Office couldn’t provide him with any recourse if it fell through. If a contract were registered through the Office and the client either failed to pay up or tried to fudge the details of the job, it was recorded in the Office’s database. No one wanted a mark like that on their record, so this arrangement encouraged the hunters to honor their agreements.

But without the Office’s involvement, the only thing making a client honor their agreement was the hunter on the other end of the contract. In other words, if a client refused to pay for a completed job—and even if the hunter got killed trying to collect his promised compensation—the fault would have lain with the hunter for accepting the job in the first place. Commitments made within the city walls were one thing, but out in the lawless wasteland, one’s word was hardly worth a hill of beans. In fact,

officially registering a job with the Hunter Office counted for so much that hunters largely assumed unregistered jobs were scams.

As a veteran hunter, Shikarabe was of course aware of all of this—yet he'd divulged to Akira that his proposal was unregistered anyway. That meant the amount he was prepared to offer the boy would be great enough to make it worth the risk.

Shikarabe explained that once the monsters were exterminated and the job was over, the hunters would take whatever was left of the Office's reward after expenses and divide it among the whole team, with each person's cut based on their individual performance. However, Shikarabe and his colleagues would not be included in that division. The final number of participants was still up in the air, but if it ended up just being the four of them, all the reward money would go to Akira. Shikarabe and his colleagues would receive the bounty from the Hunter Office, deduct all the costs of the job, and deposit the rest directly into Akira's account. And even if they failed to defeat the monsters, Shikarabe would personally pay Akira five million aurum to cover his expenses.

But Akira still had a few questions. "Let me clarify a few things. First, when you say 'cover expenses,' what exactly does that entail? How much does that come out to?"

"I can't give you a set figure, so let me explain what doesn't count as expenses instead, like debt. You can't say 'I can't participate in this operation unless my debts are paid, so count that as an expense.' If you have debts, pay them out of your own cut of the money."

"There are folks out there who'd try to make that an expense?"

"Absolutely. Equipment costs don't count as expenses either. Say someone dropped five hundred million aurum on gear to take down a five-hundred-million-aurum bounty. If we acknowledged that as an expense, the bastard would be swiping the whole pot."

"Well, that makes sense."

"However, costs for consumables like ammo, rental equipment—those things count. And also..." Shikarabe looked deep in thought, then scowled as though put out. "Look, searching for loopholes is a huge pain in the ass. Even if we end up succeeding in taking down these bounties, neither I nor my colleagues will take a single aurum for ourselves. You have my word on that."

For now, Akira felt satisfied with that response. “Next question: How many members will be on this team?”

“At minimum, four, including you. The final number will depend on the upcoming negotiations, but most likely around fifteen to twenty. We’d like to get as many as we can, but my estimate’s thirty at most.”

“Third question: How can you guarantee I get paid?”

“I can’t.”

Shikarabe’s response was short, to the point, and final. Akira’s expression hardened, and he glared at the veteran hunter, who stared right back, unfazed. Silently they locked gazes, each trying to get the other to back down.

Akira finally realized what it meant for a job to be unregistered.

Seeing this, Shikarabe added a qualification. “However, I think I’d much prefer paying you honestly over fleecing you and having to fight you to the death when you’re all pissed off.”

Akira’s silence became more thoughtful as he mulled over whether Shikarabe was telling the truth. But the veteran hunter added, “Look, if I thought you were so weak I’d rather fight you than pay you, I wouldn’t have hired you in the first place. You’d be dead weight.”

Now Akira looked conflicted. Was Shikarabe acknowledging him as a capable hunter—or that he’d fleece him in a heartbeat if Akira *wasn’t* capable? Ultimately, though, the boy realized it didn’t matter. As long as he remained capable, he didn’t have to worry about the second interpretation. And reading between the lines, he realized that was the real message—the real threat—that Shikarabe wanted to get across.

Once again, Akira was satisfied with Shikarabe’s answer for the time being, so he moved on. “Fourth question: What’s your reason for not wanting the Hunter Office involved with this job? I haven’t heard anything yet that explains why the contract couldn’t be made officially.”

It seemed like an easy enough question to Akira, but Shikarabe’s face became stern once more, and the veteran hunter hesitated before replying.

“If I said I couldn’t answer, would that be a deal-breaker?”

“It would. At the very least, I don’t want to be unknowingly roped into some squabble that isn’t even my problem.”

Shikarabe glanced at his colleagues’ reactions, gauging whether they thought it’d be okay for him to talk. But Parga spoke up first.

“We might as well tell him,” he said with a bitter grin. “Cat’s gonna be let out of the bag soon enough anyway. I understand why you wouldn’t want to, though. I wouldn’t either.”

Yamanobe agreed. “Yeah, as long as he doesn’t broadcast it to the world, I don’t see any issue. You recommended this guy personally, so I’d hate for him to walk away because of a reason like that.”

Sighing in resignation, Shikarabe faced Akira once more. “Do *not* go telling this to anyone, okay?” he warned. “This is internal Druncam information—strictly confidential, and normally restricted from outsiders.”

“I understand,” said Akira, nodding earnestly.

Shikarabe gave a sigh like there was no helping it. “Essentially, well, a turf war’s more or less broken out within the syndicate.” His tone became slightly sullen, as if discussing a family member who was caught up in something shameful.

Chapter 88: One of Those Murderous, Self-Destructive Types

Druncam was one of Kugamayama's countless hunter syndicates, not to mention a private military company that primarily worked with hunters. But it dwarfed all of its peers in size—through strengthening its connections with the city and gaining influence, it now boasted a membership exponentially greater than when it had been founded.

When enough people join an organization, factions inevitably start to form. Tensions between management and the regular members rise. And sometimes the discord between factions becomes so severe that it hinders the organization's ability to operate. This was precisely what Druncam was facing right now—the war raging among its multiple factions was threatening to rip the syndicate apart.

There were several main divisions among its members. The veterans mostly consisted of the old hands who had been with Druncam since its inception. The rookies, on the other hand, included the young hunters who would become the organization's future. And lastly, there were the desk jockeys, the employees who'd gained power within the company by meddling with its operations from behind the scenes. Sometimes the factions would cooperate; other times they would butt heads. But there were also disagreements even within individual factions, and they'd divided even further into subfactions as a result.

The vast majority of the veterans hated the desk jockeys because the latter had never spent a single second outside the comfort of the city—despite constantly griping about how much of the syndicate's budget was allotted to the ammo and medicine that the hunters needed to survive. But some veterans sucked up to them, hoping to increase their connections and find more lucrative jobs.

Meanwhile, most of the rookies hated the veterans because the more seasoned hunters were always looking down on them for being young and

inexperienced. However, other tyros changed their tune after a veteran helped them realize the great gulf in skill between them, either by showing them up or by revealing to them that the money the veterans earned was used to purchase the equipment that kept the rookies alive.

As for the desk jockeys, they tended to fawn over the "Group A" rookies (those with comparatively well-to-do upbringings) while treating the "Group B" rookies (the less fortunate ones from the slums) like dirt, causing further friction between these two groups. And if that wasn't enough, even the desk jockeys were divided among themselves. Most were purely clerical employees with no hunter experience whatsoever, but there were quite a few former hunters as well; and even among those who weren't, there were some who actually sympathized with the hunters, leading to internal conflict and strife within their own faction.

In short, all these factions and subfactions, big and small, were currently embroiled in a power struggle, and Druncam was falling apart at the seams. So to one-up the competition, the veterans—Shikarabe's faction—had set their sights on exterminating the bounty monsters. With that feather in their cap, no one could dispute their influence.

Akira listened to Shikarabe's account of Druncam's situation from beginning to end, but he still didn't understand. "Okay, but how does that relate to not going through the Office for this current job?"

"If the Hunter Office gets involved, Druncam policy dictates the job has to go through a third-party negotiator. They'd maintain neutrality when it came to our internal dispute, sure, but they'd have to have information on every faction to do that, meaning this knowledge would become public. By keeping this job unregistered, we aim to prevent that."

"Sounds like a huge pain all around," Akira said.

Shikarabe gave a deep sigh. "You got that right," he spat.

Akira could feel the pent-up emotion in that reply, and a rueful grin came to his lips. "All right, I'm satisfied. No more questions."

The veteran sighed once more before returning to negotiation mode. "That so? Then let's hear your answer. Will you accept the job, or not?"

"I'll take it, on several conditions. I'll go along with your general plan, but don't expect me to coordinate with your unit in perfect sync or anything. I'll make my own decisions when necessary, and if I determine there's no hope of winning, I'm hightailing it out of there. And if I decide to

run, I'll let you know beforehand so I'm not leaving you high and dry, but I'm not sticking around to fight a losing battle. So if that's all fine with you, I accept."

"Those're some awfully self-serving conditions."

"You're one to talk. I'm not gonna be your sacrificial pawn on a job the Hunter Office hasn't even approved. What's *your* answer?"

Shikarabe hesitated. "Fine."

With that, the deal was sealed, and—albeit by decidedly irregular means—Akira had joined the bounty hunt.

Akira, was that really a good idea? Alpha asked him. *Wasn't the reason you holed up in the city in the first place precisely to* avoid *encountering those monsters?*

Well, at least I made sure I can turn tail if the going gets tough. Then something occurred to him. *Do you think it'll be risky with my current abilities?*

You won't be fighting alone, and you'll have my support regardless, so I won't stop you. I was just surprised at how gung ho you became all of a sudden. It's not like Elena and Sara are involved this time.

Come to think of it, you've got a point. Although they did receive a similar offer from Druncam, it seems.

In fact, the reason Shikarabe had alluded to the women's offer to begin with was because he thought it might pique Akira's interest. And he'd been right on the money.

Okay, Akira reflected. *Maybe their involvement was the bait that lured me here. But so what? The sooner we get these bounty monsters out of the way, the sooner I can get back to hunting relics. Wouldn't you agree this is better than waiting around hoping for someone else to resolve things?*

Sure, we'll go with that, Alpha replied. Meanwhile, she was deep in thought. Without a doubt, Elena and Sara's connection to this venture has been a factor in Akira's decision to hear Shikarabe out. Yet it ultimately hadn't mattered in his decision to accept the job.

For the time being, she determined that the women's influence on Akira was still within permissible limits—but she didn't know how long it would stay that way. She was ready to devise a countermeasure whenever necessary.

After Akira had accepted the job, Shikarabe asked him to stick around for a bit longer. The negotiations with other members were to follow, and Shikarabe wanted him present. Akira left his seat opposite Shikarabe and moved to a nearby one, to give the negotiators some room, then ordered some simple fare from the menu terminal embedded in the large table. Shikarabe had already assured him the cost would be covered as an operational expense, so he obliged and ordered as much as he could stomach.

While Akira waited for the food to arrive, Shikarabe laid out for him the plan to hunt the bounties. Eventually a woman showed up with his food on a tray. She was dressed not as a waitress but in a hostess outfit clearly designed to attract the opposite sex. A bit surprised to see a child like Akira here, she set the tray down in front of Akira and gave Shikarabe a dubious look.

"Now here's a fresh new face," she said. "And a *young* one, at that, to be on the second floor. An acquaintance of yours, Shikarabe?"

"That's right, and he's very busy right now, so no soliciting when we're in the middle of business. And tell the other girls that too."

"I'm not gonna try to seduce a *kid*, don't worry. How about you three, though? Up for some fun?" the woman asked with a textbook bewitching smile.

Shikarabe, however, shooed her away in irritation. "I thought I made it clear to your boss that we'd be busy. Did he not tell you? Consider everyone sitting at this table off-limits."

"Playing hard to get, I see. Why're you here on the second floor, then?"

"We've got our reasons. Look, after our business is done, there'll be a toast, and we'll be feeling a little more loose with our inhibitions—and our wallets. Wait until then."

"I'll hold you to that, okay?" The woman grinned teasingly and walked away.

Akira, for his part, looked puzzled. "Shikarabe, what does it mean to be on the second floor?"

"Ah, that. The third floor up above's a brothel. That woman just now's a prostitute from there, but she moonlights as a waitress down here while scouting out new clients. So people who just want to enjoy a drink typically stick to the first floor."

Akira gave a nod, but then turned a reproachful gaze on Shikarabe. “What are you trying to pull, inviting a kid here?”

“When you’re a professional hunter, age doesn’t really matter, does it? I didn’t do it to harass you or anything.” Shikarabe laughed off Akira’s criticism. “This might sound bad coming from the guy who just offered you an unregistered job, but most people that end up accepting such contracts have special reasons for doing so. Basically, they’re super desperate. Better to negotiate with people like that up here, away from the public eye. So don’t worry, it’s not personal.”

Akira sighed, decided to let it go, and started on his meal.

The next candidates to arrive after Akira were the additional members Yamanobe had reached out to—two hunters wracked with debt, plus a monitor tasked with watching their every move. With them was also a fourth person, a representative appointed to handle negotiations with Shikarabe’s group on behalf of the creditor.

Yamanobe switched seats with Shikarabe and beckoned the men over. The negotiator, Tomejima, sat in the seat Yamanobe indicated, opposite him.

“Did I keep you waiting long?” Tomejima began.

“Yeah, a while. So what you’ve brought had better be worth it,” Yamanobe replied.

“Naturally. Though finding people who actually met your standards was more trouble than I expected, so you’ll forgive me for being tardy. If you’d just wanted bodies to fill out your ranks, I could’ve been here much faster, but not only did the men have to be capable enough to hold their own against the bounties, they had to be willing to accept an unregistered job. So it was quite tough, I’ll have you know.”

“That’s what we paid you guys the big bucks for, wasn’t it? If the guys behind you aren’t up to snuff, I’ll have you know we’ll be taking action accordingly.”

“I’m well aware. Now then, shall we get down to business?”

While Yamanobe and Tomejima launched into their discussion, Akira apprehensively watched the group of newcomers from the side, fork frozen in midair. His gaze was fixed on the monitor’s face. The monitor noticed Akira, gave a wry grin, and sat down next to him.

“Long time no see,” he said. It was Kolbe, who Akira had met back when he’d been hunting relics in Yonozuka Station with Sheryl. Kolbe had been with Guba, who had later attacked Sheryl, so Akira regarded him with more than a hint of wariness.

“Yeah.”

“Hey, no need to be so uptight! *I* didn’t do anything to you, right?”

“Yeah, but your guy attacked Sheryl, so forgive me if I can’t just relax.” Then Akira looked surprised. “Wait, how’d you know that in the first place?”

“A group of hunters in debt ended up kicking the bucket before they were able to pay up. Of course I’d investigate.” Kolbe then explained his position—he was currently serving as a monitor for a relic-hunting brigade of indebted hunters. The ones who had attacked Sheryl had owed overwhelmingly large amounts. When they’d died, Kolbe had initially thought they’d merely run off, and he’d investigated their whereabouts. But he’d turned up a lot of new information along the way, he told Akira.

He was defending himself as much as he was actually explaining, but what he said checked out. Yet Akira’s suspicion only deepened.

“You *really* weren’t involved? At all?”

“Only insofar as I didn’t do my job as a monitor, and for that, I can only sincerely apologize. But I didn’t tell them to do what they did, and I didn’t egg them on indirectly either. I had nothing to do with that incident.”

Alpha?

He’s not lying, at least, she answered.

Akira knew he wasn’t the most skilled at reading people, so he’d let Alpha judge the veracity of Kolbe’s statement. Given her assessment, he decided to trust the man for now. “All right. Sorry for doubting you.”

At that, Kolbe relaxed as well. “Don’t sweat it. I’m just glad the misunderstanding’s cleared up now.” He grinned and waved it off, eager to change the subject before Akira could ask if he knew who *had* egged them on. “So why are you here, anyway? You’re not gonna tell me you’re saddled with some debt too, are you?”

“Nah, no debt. I’ve teamed up with Shikarabe before. He saw my skills and hired me to join the hunt.”

“Wait, you accepted an unregistered job just because? You didn’t have any special circumstances like a debt?” Kolbe looked puzzled.

“What’s debt got to do with it?” Now Akira seemed equally confused. Neither was on the other’s wavelength.

Shikarabe interjected. “Hey buddy, don’t go prying into the particulars of Akira’s agreement with us. Akira, don’t pay this guy any mind, and don’t tell him anything.”

That shut both of them up.

But then someone else cut in. “Hey, what gives?! Why’s this brat on the team?!” The incensed voice belonged to Kadol, the hunter standing behind Tomejima.

“Don’t speak when you’re not spoken to. Just shut up and wait,” Tomejima growled.

But his warning only made Kadol angrier. “*Excuse* me? We’re risking our lives out here fighting huge-ass monsters! So why is some kid joining up? You better not be bringing on extra people so we get less of a cut!”

“I said shut *up*! Don’t interfere with the negotiations, dammit! Hey, Kolbe, watch him!” Tomejima had Kolbe stand beside Kadol to keep him in line, but the negotiator grinned to himself as he resumed negotiations with Yamanobe. A good excuse had just presented itself. “Sorry for that outburst, really. But, well, I kinda get where he’s coming from, don’t you? These hunters are risking their very lives to pay back their debts. If I was in their position and that kid got the same cut as me, I’d want to complain as well. Can’t you do something about that?”

“Something like what, specifically? You’re supposed to be a negotiator, aren’t you? State your terms.”

“I won’t demand you remove him from the team, but I’d like you to at least lower his cut of the pay so that it matches his ability.” Tomejima glanced at Akira meaningfully as he spoke. A common criticism of most young Druncam hunters was that their equipment performed better than they themselves did. Akira didn’t look very capable either, so Tomejima had unconsciously lumped him in with the rookies in his mind, convinced the boy was there just to buff out the list of participants and dilute the individual payouts.

Kadol was more or less thinking along the same lines, but his suspicion of Akira ran even deeper—he doubted the kid was even a real hunter. He thought they’d just outfitted a random slum brat in cheap gear that looked expensive enough to be convincing. In his mind, suspicion grew that both

Tomejima and Shikarabe's group were conspiring to lower his own payout, and this new addition to the team was just another part of their scheme.

Yamanobe and Parga had made no comment, since Shikarabe had personally selected Akira, but both of them secretly doubted Akira's ability as well. He certainly didn't look very strong to either of them.

Now all eyes in the room focused on Akira—who remained unfazed and continued eating his meal. Their gazes went to Shikarabe next, who gave a troubled sigh before glaring at Tomejima. "Absolutely not. Our negotiations with Akira are already concluded. We're not going to change the terms now just so they can suit you better." Then he turned to Kadol with a scornful look. "And if I reduced Akira's pay to reflect his lack of ability, by the same standard I'd round *your* cut down to absolutely nothing."

"Wha—?! You saying this little punk's stronger than me?!" Kadol, realizing Shikarabe was calling him weak, unconsciously raised his voice. Yet a single thread of reason still remained, holding him back from any further recklessness.

But then he noticed his outburst had caught the attention of Akira himself. The boy not only gave Kadol a look that said his very existence was bothersome, but even sighed and returned to his meal as though it was more important.

The last thread snapped. Kadol became convinced that every single one of Akira's actions and gestures were deliberately meant to ridicule him.

"You brat!" he bellowed. Consumed by his impulsive rage, he brandished his gun and pointed the muzzle at Akira. Whether he intended to really kill him or merely threaten him, or whether he was merely so irritated by the boy's complacent attitude that he just wanted to see him cower, even Kadol didn't know. His fury had simply gotten the better of him, and before he knew it, he'd ended up resorting to violence.

Wham! Kadol's face slammed against the floor. His gun flew out of his hands. Before he could scream, a gun's muzzle crammed its way so far into his open mouth that it struck the back of his throat.

He became vaguely aware of the gun and that he was lying on the ground, but it had all happened so suddenly that the rest of his thoughts were a jumble, and he was unable to make head or tail of his own situation. Then, as his eyes regained focus, he saw the figure of Akira looming above him, still holding the gun, his finger on the trigger.

Kadol instinctively tried to point his own weapon at Akira, only to belatedly realize there was no weapon—it had already been swatted away. At that, Akira prodded the gun down his throat even farther. The ensuing pain and the murderous glare Akira gave him sent a clear enough message—try anything else, and he was dead. Kadol groaned a bit in agony and fear, but he obeyed, his face still a mask of terror.

Tomejima's group had only grasped what had happened after the fact, and looked utterly astonished. Shikarabe and his companions, meanwhile, had followed what was happening from the beginning and only showed mild surprise. When Kadol had trained his gun on Akira, his movements had been out of Akira's line of sight. Yet the boy hadn't just managed to react—he'd leaped up from his seat, closed the distance between them, used his left hand to swat away his opponent's gun while pulling out his own with his right, and crammed the latter in Kadol's mouth.

Kolbe had also tried to stop Kadol, but Akira had been faster. It was all Kolbe could do to follow his opponent's movements in a fight, so he gawked at Akira's feat in open-mouthed disbelief. Shikarabe didn't show any outward surprise, but in truth he too was struggling to keep his astonishment and doubt from showing on his face.

That's not a normal reaction to an opponent you can't even see, Shikarabe thought. *Now that I think of it, even back in the underground ruins, Akira was able to accurately pinpoint the locations of faraway monsters with ease. Did he use the same technique here, I wonder? Could he be running his scanner 24-7, constantly monitoring everything around him? Somehow I doubt it...*

As it turned out, Shikarabe's intuition and guesswork had almost led him to the truth. The one monitoring everything around Akira, however, wasn't the boy himself but Alpha.

And his movements... Even if they can be explained by his powered suit, the one he's wearing now isn't the one he wore underground. To move like that, you'd need a good deal of training to get used to the physical specs of the suit. So how was he able to get acclimated to a new one in such a short span of time? It can't just be a high-end suit control unit. There's got to be something more...

Once again, his hunches were nearly correct—Akira could only operate the suit at such an advanced level because of Alpha's support.

I don't get it. For some reason, it seems my intuition falls short when it comes to Akira. Despite its accuracy, that same intuition always convinced him he'd been mistaken in the end. As a result, he'd failed to understand Akira once again.

Meanwhile, Yamanobe and Parga, having seen Akira's unbelievable performance with their own eyes, now understood why Shikarabe had reached out to Akira specifically. But a hunter's evaluation wasn't based on combat strength alone. Just as they were wondering whether his other skills were as sharp, Akira took action again.

Keeping a blank expression as he held his gun in his opponent's mouth, he broke his silence nonchalantly, as though he were commenting on the weather. "Hey, Shikarabe. If I kill this guy, how much would that matter for the bounty hunt?" Akira figured he was now effectively under Shikarabe's employ, and the sole reason he'd stayed his trigger finger thus far was because he guessed it might leave a bad taste in his employer's mouth if he killed one of the hunters Shikarabe was trying to hire.

Kadol realized that whether he lived or died hinged on Shikarabe's answer, and he began shaking like a leaf.

"Do whatever you want," said the veteran hunter. "But the mess afterward's on you."

"What mess?"

"This isn't the wasteland. You've got to pay to get the body removed from the bar and disposed of, pay to clean the blood off the floors, pay to repair the holes in the floor, and the like. And that'll all come out of your own pocket."

Akira's cold gaze at his enemy now became tinged with annoyance. "It can't just be written off as expenses?"

"No. Also, you've got to deal with the owner after you've sent all his paying customers fleeing at the sound of gunshots. That's on you too, and a bigger pain than you'd think, so I'm not touching it at all."

Akira sighed and put away his gun. Since he'd already defanged Kadol, he didn't *have* to kill him now, and it looked like doing so would be a real headache.

If this had been the wasteland, Kadol would've already been dead. There, you could just chuck a body anywhere and nobody minded. Or rather, it was because so many hunters thought this way that the wasteland

was so lawless in the first place. So the fact that this incident had occurred in the city instead had just barely saved his life.

Akira turned to face Shikarabe. “I’m going home. I get the feeling that if I stay here, things are gonna be even more of a pain.”

“That’s fine. I’ll contact you later. Until then, focus on preparing for the big hunt.”

“Gotcha. Later.” With that, Akira walked away. He was about to reach the stairs when he stopped and added, “Shikarabe, you’re free to hire that guy if you want, but I wouldn’t promise anyone he’ll return alive if I were you.”

Shikarabe grinned. “Suppose I shouldn’t.”

His point made, Akira gave a small sigh as he headed down the stairs.

Yamanobe watched him go with interest. “That boy’s got a short fuse. One of those murderous, self-destructive types, I’d say. Someday he’s gonna kill so many people he’ll end up destroying himself.”

Yamanobe hadn’t actually approved of Akira’s behavior just now. However, Parga more or less had, and he objected to Yamanobe’s assessment.

“There’s no guaranteeing how short your opponent’s fuse is gonna be either, so I’d say it’s less murder and more self-defense. You gotta be able to keep the two separate.”

“Sure, but that distinction can become less and less clear over time. Then you get that poor sap over there.” Yamanobe chuckled, pointing to Kadol still sprawled on the floor.

At the sight of a prime example of someone who had made light of that distinction and pulled a gun on another person at the drop of a hat, Parga groaned, knowing he had no rebuttal.

Kadol finally got to his feet and began searching for his gun.

Kolbe already had it, though. He kicked Kadol as hard as he could and sent him crumpling to the ground once more with a cry of pain, then stomped on him with all his might. “Nap time.” Now Kadol wasn’t able to rise even if he’d wanted to. Kolbe planted his foot on top of the unconscious man and glared at the other debt holder in the room.

“Don’t you try any funny business either,” he warned.

The man’s face contorted in fear, and he nodded fervently.

Yamanobe laughed in a light attempt to intimidate Tomejima. “Now

then, we were in the middle of working out a deal, weren't we? True, there was nothing in the conditions I gave you *explicitly* stating the additional members had to be smart enough to not pull a gun on one of their allies, but that's because it was such a no-brainer I didn't think I needed to. But with you, Tomejima, perhaps I should've taken special care to spell it out?"

Tomejima broke out in a cold sweat as he began to panic. "N-No, that's not—"

"It's not like a deal's been made yet, so one might take all this to mean you guys aren't actually on our side. Care to explain yourself? And if I'm wrong, I'm sure you wouldn't mind pointing out to me where I've made a misunderstanding, would you?"

Tomejima's uphill negotiations with Yamanobe had only just begun.

◆

Per Shikarabe's orders, Akira remained at his own house on standby for further instructions. Shikarabe's group needed time to prepare and formulate a strategy for the bounty hunt. And while time was of the essence, since they wanted to beat others to the punch, they would have been foolish to simply try to exterminate the monsters as quickly as possible—they needed to determine the proper time to act.

The reason for this was as follows: While the reward for eliminating the tankrantula had originally been set at one hundred million aurum, it had now ballooned to a whopping eight hundred million. After the Office had posted the bounty for the monster's defeat, many overeager novice hunters had failed, either meeting their demise or determining the pay wasn't worth the trouble and giving up. To lure in the more skilled, experienced hunters, the transport companies had raised the bounty. However, there was no guarantee they wouldn't go even higher—if no one succeeded, it was entirely possible the companies would decide the reward wasn't sufficient and offer even more.

Shikarabe and his comrades, therefore, wanted to launch their operation whenever it would prove most profitable. Shikarabe had informed Akira that rather than move out immediately, the current plan was to bide their time and see if the companies would sweeten their offer any further. But since things could change on a dime, he had to be ready to move out at a

moment's notice.

So Akira stayed home and waited for Shikarabe's call. "But man, I can't believe the tankrantula's worth eight hundred million now," he said, frowning at the monster's updated information on his terminal. "That's a *ridiculous* increase. If even that amount ain't enough, then just how strong *is* this thing?"

It's not that simple. The only real way to accurately gauge a monster's strength is to face it in combat.

"Well, sure, but none of the hunters that tried succeeded, even when it was worth one hundred million."

Perhaps they just bit off more than they could chew. For a hunter, the ability to pick your battles is just as valuable a skill as any. In that sense, your decision to stay away from the wasteland for a while turned out to be the correct one. Alpha gave him a knowing smile.

"Guess you're right," Akira agreed with a reluctant grin. "I've managed to avoid running into one of those monsters and having to fight it to the death all by myself. Given my usual luck, I oughta count my blessings." He chuckled, privately lamenting his misfortune like always, but taking pride in the fact that this time his good judgment had prevented it from rearing its ugly head.

◆

Meanwhile, Katsuya was summoned by Mizuha to a meeting room at Druncam HQ. Mizuha was one of the desk jockeys' top brass, so she was a supporter of Katsuya's, as well as his superior. Normally, Katsuya would also have wanted to get along with her.

But when he entered the room, she saw he wore a wooden expression. It had been Mizuha, after all, who had dispatched his team to Yonozuka Station—and several of his teammates had died there as a result.

"What do you want?" Katsuya's tone was far from amicable.

Mizuha could think of several reasons why that might be, but she decided to start off by trying to improve his mood. "First, good news! I was able to get the meds you requested. Here you go," Mizuha said cheerfully, and set a box in front of him. It was the same type of medicine that Akira had given him in Yonozuka. "With all the animosity going on between the

factions nowadays, I thought it'd be best to hand over something this expensive to you privately rather than in public."

"It cost that much?"

"Oh, yes. It's not uncommon to pay two million aurum a box for pharmaceuticals of this quality." Mizuha deliberately let Katsuya know the medicine's high price, hoping that he would feel indebted to her. In truth, she'd acquired it as a bonus while negotiating to resupply Druncam's stock of consumables, so she'd gotten it for far less than the market value.

But her statement only proved to Katsuya that Akira had been telling the truth. In other words, Akira was sufficiently well-off to acquire such expensive medicine—and he wasn't even part of a syndicate like Katsuya. The young hunter picked up the box and stared at it with mixed feelings. But he at least tried to show his gratitude. "Thanks."

Mizuha, however, felt unsatisfied with Katsuya's response. She had gone to considerable lengths to get the meds for him, yet his mood had hardly improved. But she didn't let it show, and just smiled. "You're very welcome. To be honest, it took a lot of effort to get, but since it was a request from you, I did all I could."

An uncomfortable silence hung in the air for a moment. "I see. Sorry to have troubled you."

The awkward atmosphere in the room persisted, so Mizuha changed tack to clear the air. "Now then, let's discuss the reason I called you here. I'm sure you're aware of the bounty monsters roaming the wasteland as of late. Druncam has decided to participate in hunting them down, and I've been tasked with forming the team. Katsuya, *you're* going to be the leader."

Katsuya looked surprised, then confused. "*Me?* No way! Those monsters are too strong—even my team wouldn't be able to beat them on its own. Back at Yonozuka Station, it was all we could do to escape!"

"No need to worry. We're sending a large unit, and you'll all be properly equipped. With the preparations we're taking, those monsters are as good as dead. All you'll have to do is give the orders. It'll be perfectly fine—just let the planners do all the work."

Katsuya looked away from Mizuha as if greatly conflicted, then turned back to face her once more, his expression grave. "B-But..."

Mizuha picked up on the clear reluctance in Katsuya's attitude, but read too much into it. Masking her mounting dissatisfaction, she adopted a

melancholy expression and bowed her head apologetically. “I know, I know. You can’t bring yourself to trust me after what happened at Yonozuka. I’m truly sorry for the losses you suffered. However—and you may not believe me when I say this either—I was trying to make the best decision for everyone’s sake. It’s true that there might have been fewer casualties if I’d passed the info on the ruin to Shikarabe’s team from the outset. But if I’d done that, you and your team would still be the veterans’ gofers, and they would’ve all kept looking down on you. I couldn’t stand for that. In order for you all to become hunters the veterans would respect, I had to at least have you scope out the ruins and occupy its entrances and exits before calling the veterans in. Then they wouldn’t be able to call you greenhorns with expensive gear anymore. At least, that was my aim.”

Like Katsuya, Mizuha regretted that his team’s trip to the ruins had ended in failure. She let that honest emotion show on her face as she added, “Of course, these words all ring hollow now. I may have not foreseen the outcome, but that’s no excuse for what happened. I acknowledge that I’ve compromised your trust in me, and to repair it I intend to make every possible effort to lead this team to success.”

Mizuha suspected that one of the other factions had been trying to plant ideas in Katsuya’s head to lessen his opinion of her. To quell his doubts, she had chosen her words carefully. But she hadn’t lied, strictly speaking. And she really did intend to do everything she could to make this hunt a success—after all, it was a prime opportunity for her to make up for the Yonozuka Station blunder, which was her fault to an extent.

On the other hand, if she botched this operation as well, she could kiss her job goodbye.

“If you don’t believe anything else I’m saying, at least believe that...” She paused. “No, actually, I’ll let the results speak for themselves. It’s probably too much to ask for you to believe me right now.” She adopted an expression that looked melancholic while still showing Katsuya her determination to make it up to him.

The events at Yonozuka Station had indeed made Katsuya harbor doubts toward Mizuha. But the sincere, strong will Katsuya sensed from Mizuha’s demeanor cleared them from his mind. Even so, he still wore a sullen expression.

“No, I understand that you were just acting in our best interests,” he

clarified. “That’s not the problem. I just don’t think I’m cut out to command a large unit.” The old Katsuya might have accepted her commission without hesitation, announcing that if it was for his comrades, he’d put forth every possible effort. He might have confidently declared that he’d protect everyone even if things went south. But now, the visions he saw of the teammates he’d failed to save in Yonozuka kept him from making such statements.

Mizuha’s attitude did a one-eighty, and she smiled brightly. Now that she knew Katsuya’s bad mood had nothing to do with her, she decided to persuade him by buttering him up. “That’s not the case at all! I’m confident you’ll pull it off with flying colors. I know this may not sound like a compliment, but even in those ruins, under those impossible circumstances, you brought your team back alive with only minimum casualties. That’s enough reason for me to have faith in you. Of course,” she went on, “I know you wanted to save them all, that you wanted everyone to come back alive. Believe me, I understand. But when you consider how many hunters ended up dead, I think you should be proud that you managed to bring your team back at all. In fact, I asked the survivors to give their versions of the event so I could confirm what happened there, and they were all grateful to you, Katsuya. ‘It’s thanks to him that I’m alive,’ they said. ‘I’d expect nothing less from him!’ They sang your praises! So you ought to accept their gratitude and become team leader—for the sake of all of them.”

In fact, the praise Mizuha had just heaped on Katsuya was genuine. Regardless of their skill levels, many other hunters exploring the ruins had been devoured by the monsters. And Mizuha was able to use the survivor’s statements as proof to support her claims, making the latter easier for Katsuya to swallow.

Katsuya wavered for an instant, but told himself accepting her commission would be for the good of his comrades. He managed a smile. “Very well. I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you for understanding. We’ll be in touch as soon as there’s anything new. Until then, refrain from doing any hunter work. I wouldn’t want you to get hurt and not be able to participate.” Satisfied at last, Mizuha dismissed him, and Katsuya left the meeting room.

Back in the hallway, Katsuya’s face became grim and melancholy once more. All around him crowded the comrades that were supposed to have

died at Yonozuka Station—the ones he'd been unable to save—casting condemning gazes toward him. Katsuya squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again.

The figures had vanished. He gave a small sigh.

I know they're just imaginary, but they always feel so real.

For a while now, he'd been suffering from recurring nightmares, in which his comrades blamed him for not being able to rescue them. But recently—more specifically, since returning from Yonozuka Station—he'd started to see them while he was awake.

Yumina had been waiting in the hallway, and he heard her call out to him. "Katsuya! Are you done with your meeting? What'd she want to talk about?"

Katsuya grinned, trying to pretend like nothing was wrong. "Oh, nothing much. She just appointed me to be the leader of the bounty hunt team."

"Wow, really? Impressive!"

"Also, here's the medicine I asked her for. She gave it to me inside because she thought it would look bad if anyone else saw her hand it over. Anyway, we've got to give this back to that guy to make up for the one we took, but how should we do that?"

"Hmm... I'm sure we'll meet up with him again sooner or later, so let's simply hold on to it for now. Just don't push yourself too hard, though, or you'll use it all up before we get it back to him," Yumina teased.

Katsuya grinned wryly. "Yeah, yeah, I know."

"Good. Airi's saving us seats in the cafeteria, so let's not keep her waiting." Yumina smiled, pulling Katsuya along as they headed off. She'd noticed the gloom behind his smile, but didn't point it out—she couldn't very well tell him to *not* let his comrades' deaths bother him. Instead, she firmly gripped his hand so that, at the very least, they wouldn't take him with them.

Chapter 89: Chains and Perceptions

Akira had asked Sheryl to launch a business venture selling relics—or that's what she thought, at any rate. So she was now paying the Kugama Building a visit with Erio, Katsuragi, and Darius.

When Sheryl had told Katsuragi about Akira's request, she'd reminded him that he'd agreed to cooperate with her in exchange for Akira keeping him safe, and so the merchant had no choice but to go along. However, given that her sandwich business had gone unexpectedly well, he decided to put some genuine effort into helping her, suspecting that things just might pan out in his favor.

In particular, he'd suggested that while Sheryl would be the face of the enterprise, it would in reality be a subsidiary of his own mobile storefront. That way, when it came time to open for business, Sheryl would officially be able to accept the payment options specifically for hunters—that is, they could pay through their accounts with the Hunter Office or with their licenses. For her sandwich stand, she'd managed by processing payments through Katsuragi's store as a stopgap; but relics were sold for high prices, and with the amount of money the relic shop was projected to handle, it would be difficult for Sheryl to operate without a payment system of her own. So this was a necessary step.

When she reached the Hunter Office reception desk on the first floor, Sheryl removed her coat, which was made for traversing the wasteland, and revealed the chic clothes she wore underneath. In an instant, all eyes were on her.

Her outfit was crafted from Old World material, and Akira had paid over one and a half million aurum to have it made up by the exceptionally skilled seamstress Selene. Sheryl herself could hardly believe she was wearing such extravagant clothes—she felt like she'd stepped out of a fairy tale. She was turning the heads of hunters far wealthier than the everyday folks she was used to dealing with.

She was also committed to playing the part of someone as well-

mannered as they were well-dressed. She didn't give off the vibe that she was a lower-class girl wearing fancy apparel, nor did it seem like the clothes were wearing her—she looked like she'd dressed this way her whole life. Her mannerisms, while in this outfit, even suggested a hint of nobility—and with her natural beauty, she looked like a bona fide princess.

To the average person, it seemed like the heiress of some well-to-do family had ventured outside the walls and was now being escorted back to the confines of the city by her bodyguards. None of them suspected that Sheryl was actually from the slums.

There was, however, someone with her who appeared like a fish out of water—the boy who'd come along as her bodyguard, Erio.

Erio was completely overwhelmed by the atmosphere within the Kugama Building. He'd once come as far as the entrance, but the inside of the building was completely different from the outside. With the help of Katsuragi, Erio now *looked* the part of a full-fledged hunter—almost like an impostor Akira, in fact—but in reality he still had a long way to go to fill those shoes. He couldn't hide his anxiety at the aura the more experienced hunters gave off—they were clearly much more skilled than the average hunter wannabe, anyway. He sweated nervously as his eyes darted around observing them.

Sheryl quietly scolded him as she handed him her coat for safekeeping. "Erio, relax. This place isn't dangerous or anything—it's much safer than the back alleys of the slums, at least. You don't need to be so uptight."

"B-But—"

"Slowly, quietly, take a few deep breaths. That should help."

Erio did as he was told and found himself gradually calming down. With a mix of respect and awe, he marveled at Sheryl's ability to maintain her composure in a place like this. *Does she just have no fear? Even when she was kidnapped before, she didn't seem shaken up at all when she got back to base—just super tired. I know she has Akira to rescue her if the going gets tough, but still, it's not normal to be that calm—is it?*

As he wondered, Erio forgot the fear and awe from his new surroundings for a moment, and his thoughts became more rational. *Well, a normal person wouldn't try to bargain with a hunter who her own gang attacked in the first place. And yet that's how she struck a deal with Akira*

and became our boss, so she's probably just extraordinary to begin with. Yeah, she's a lot braver than all these hunter guys.

Then, in his calmness, he fully realized something for the first time—Akira wasn't here with them today. Since they had business in the Kugama Building, this would've been the perfect excuse to get him to tag along. "Sheryl, why didn't you ask Akira to come today?"

Sheryl hesitated. "I did, as a matter of fact. But he said he was busy and turned me down, so there's no helping it."

Unfortunately for Sheryl, she'd called Akira while he was on standby, waiting for Shikarabe to contact him, so he'd refused, saying, "If it's for something minor like that, then no."

Since Akira had rescued her from her kidnappers and had trusted her with something as important as selling his relics, Sheryl had been under the impression she and Akira had gotten closer of late. But when she heard his response, she was confused and distraught.

Akira, however, knew the details of the job Shikarabe had hired him for were confidential, and he didn't want to go leaking them to outsiders. So rather than elaborating, the only excuse he'd given her was "I'm busy."

"Then would you come if we postponed it to a later date?" Sheryl had asked, but Akira had rejected that proposal as well. In her deepening anxiety, she had read too much into his response, thinking that if he was going to turn down such a small request of hers, maybe he simply didn't want to be associated with her anymore.

So Sheryl didn't want to talk about Akira right now, lest those negative thoughts return. But Erio, hoping some chitchat might take his mind off his own worries, kept speaking without giving it too much thought.

"Really? What do you think he was busy doing?"

Sheryl hesitated to answer. "Why do you ask, Erio?"

"Well, it's just that if it was me, as long as there wasn't some big thing going on, I'd want to prioritize being with Aricia instead, so I just wondered what Akira's doing that's so much more important to him."

When Erio had told Akira that Sheryl had been kidnapped, Akira was unbothered—almost cruelly so, Erio had thought. Yet the hunter had immediately gone to her rescue all the same, and—after making sure she was safe—even massacred all of her attackers. If Sheryl mattered that much to him, then just what kind of errand was so important to Akira that he

would put her on the back burner?

To Erio, this was just a minor doubt born from thinking Akira felt the same way about his girlfriend as Erio did his—but for Sheryl, it was the last straw. The smile that she'd told herself she had to maintain at all times while in the Kugama Building disappeared, and she spoke in a hushed voice.

"Erio, you're not by any chance questioning my and Akira's relationship, are you?" The tone of her voice contained a chilly fury. The charming twinkle in her eyes was gone, replaced by dark, hollow orbs. Erio felt like they were peering down into the depths of his very soul.

Realizing he'd screwed up, he hastily tried to talk his way out. "N-No, of course not! You've got it all wrong—it's the opposite, actually! I just found it unusual that he'd pass up an opportunity to go on a date with you, since you two are so close! O-Oh, right! Since Akira's that loaded, he must be so busy with work that he doesn't have time to hang out with you every time you ask!" Erio panicked so much at Sheryl's abrupt change in mood that he ended up saying more than was necessary in an attempt to walk back his comment.

A short silence followed. Finally, the smile reappeared on Sheryl's face, and she even looked cheerful. "Well, if that's all you meant, then that's fine. Just be careful not to say things that might cause unnecessary misunderstandings from now on, okay? For your own sake."

Erio somehow managed to force a grin in response. "R-Right. I'll be more careful."

"Also, lower your voice. We're attracting unneeded attention."

"G-Got it." Erio breathed a sigh of relief, knowing he'd had a close call. But the timidness and trepidation he'd felt before had vanished without a trace.

Her concerns allayed, Sheryl also inwardly sighed and tried to regain her composure.

Calm down, Sheryl. If you let something that trivial get to you, you might as well be saying you're just as uncertain about you and Akira. It's fine. I'm calm, everything's fine. When my relationship with him was called into question, I just got a bit pouty. The rest of that was just an act to distract Erio from his own anxiousness. That's all.

Sheryl gave a relaxed, unconcerned smile to prove to Katsuragi, Darius, Erio, and most of all herself that it really hadn't bothered her. "Mr. Katsuragi, sorry for the wait. Erio seems to have calmed down now, so shall we move on?"

"Sure thing. This way." As if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, Katsuragi led the faux princess and her entourage farther into the building.

If Sheryl succeeded at her relic-selling business, Akira wouldn't be able to cut her out of his life so easily. Depending on her degree of success, he might even court her more proactively if he desired a bigger share of the profits. In other words, failure was not an option. Determination fueled her resolve.

◆

After they took care of all the paperwork on the building's second floor, Katsuragi suggested they go back down to the café on the ground level. While Erio chatted idly with Darius, Sheryl and Katsuragi hammered out the plan for the relic shop.

"So, Sheryl, there's one key thing we should discuss," Katsuragi said. "It's a relic shop, sure, but some of those relics just aren't gonna sell. It takes experience and knowledge of the trade to figure out which ones, so since we're already partners, I'd be happy to take care of that part. Sound good?"

"That would be wonderful," agreed Sheryl. "In fact, I was actually thinking that for unpopular relics that don't sell after a certain period of time, I might just sell them to you like usual. I heard you tried pretty hard to convince Akira to let you exchange those clothing relics for him, although he refused. But if I tell him the whole truth about your efforts, I'm sure I could get him to agree."

"Eh, no need. I'm sure Akira knows all that without needing to be told. More importantly, since you'll be dealing with valuable relics, you'll need to make sure your wares are secure."

"Yes, of course. And I'll definitely require your cooperation in that department as well."

Some subtle negotiating was taking place behind their words. Katsuragi knew that some of Akira's relics could be sold for an incredibly high price.

He'd just tried to get Sheryl to sell the most valuable ones directly to him instead of through the shop, but Sheryl had seen through him, indirectly threatening to tell Akira that Katsuragi had been attempting to buy Old World clothing from him on the cheap. Katsuragi had backed off, but then pressed her to spend the earnings from the shop on equipment from his store, to which Sheryl had agreed.

Darius listened to their exchange with amusement. As a longtime partner of Katsuragi's, he was able to read between the lines of their discussion and was wholeheartedly enjoying the game playing out between the two.

Erio didn't understand everything, but he could at least tell that another, more cutthroat discussion was going on behind the scenes. While Sheryl's dependability impressed him all over again, it also scared him—since when had Sheryl become such a shrewd negotiator?

Just then, someone passing by Sheryl's table caught sight of her sitting there and froze. "Sheryl?!"

Sheryl turned toward the voice and gave a courteous smile when she saw who it belonged to. "Hello, Katsuya. It's been a while."

That smile of hers made Katsuya fall for her all over again.

◆

Mizuha, as one of the desk jockeys' top brass, was accompanying Katsuya to the Kugama Building. By introducing Katsuya to their sponsors, she and the desk jockeys hoped to gain even more backing for their faction.

Most of those backers resided in the wealthiest parts of the city and were generally upstanding people—in the sense that they were averse to financially supporting morally bankrupt hoodlums who would kill another human being without a second thought. The rookies in Group A had been selected by the desk jockeys to appeal to the sponsors' sensibilities. These young people, all born to well-off families, had run into financial trouble after their parents or guardians had passed away, leaving them with little choice but to become hunters. They still subscribed to the city's code of ethics, instilled in them as children, and so didn't steal from, swindle, or murder others. And Druncam's virtuous sponsors were more than happy to support such good children.

Thanks to the generous backing they received, the boys and girls of

Group A were able to live and develop as hunters without having to dirty their hands with crimes, and now they felt themselves capable enough to join in the bounty hunt. To ensure the hunt succeeded (and to prove that their benefactors would make a good return on their investment in hapless children), they needed more support.

At least, that was the reason Mizuha and her allies had given for holding this meet and greet today.

Katsuya was set to be the star of the event, the poster child of the Group A rookies. He had achieved hunter rank 32—not only extraordinarily high for a novice hunter, but one of the highest among all hunters in the city. And considering how young he was, he was expected to climb even higher. On top of that, he got along well with his teammates, they placed their unwavering trust in him, and he was good-looking to boot.

Naturally, the sponsors might have suspected that this sounded too good to be true. Mizuha was fully aware of that, yet so promising was his potential that she'd still bet all her chips on Katsuya's prospects.

However, by the time they'd reached the Kugama Building, Mizuha's enthusiasm had waned considerably. "Katsuya, are you okay?" she asked, her expression serious.

He didn't answer right away. "Yeah, I'm fine." But he certainly didn't *look* fine. His weak reply and listless demeanor weren't convincing in the least, and his expression was downcast. It seemed like he could hardly raise his head—if Mizuha hadn't spoken up, he might have kept staring at the floor.

Mizuha tried her best to be considerate. "Yumina and Airi both said you hadn't been yourself recently. They were worried about you. If something's bothering you, something you weren't able to tell them about, you can talk to me. I'm here for you."

Again, it took him a bit to respond. "I'm good."

"I see." She didn't let it show, but deep down, Mizuha felt like tearing her hair out. She couldn't introduce Katsuya to her sponsors in this state—that would have the opposite effect. But it was too late to change the date of the reception now.

There's still time before it starts. I've got to nip this in the bud as soon as I can. At a loss for any other ideas, Mizuha suggested heading to the café nearby. While there, she decided she'd do everything in her power to cheer

Katsuya up before the event began.

Katsuya silently trailed behind Mizuha, plagued with visions of his dead teammates. None of them were real, but they pierced Katsuya's heart all the same.

◆

As Sheryl smiled at the smitten Katsuya, she briefly considered how to deal with him before winking at Katsuragi. The quick-witted merchant, immediately realizing what she meant, directed a modest, courteous smile toward the two of them. "Friend of yours, Sheryl?" he asked.

That let her know that Katsuragi had understood her signal. She gave Katsuya a delighted grin. "Why, yes—although, that's only if Katsuya sees *me* as a friend, I suppose. Do you, Katsuya?"

Katsuya immediately came to his senses and spluttered out a reply. "Huh? U-Uh, yeah, absolutely! O-Of course we're friends!"

At that moment, Mizuha, who'd realized that Katsuya was no longer following her, returned to his side. When she noticed Katsuya's expression, she was shocked.

"Katsuya, what happened...?" Her voice trailed off in surprise. He looked a bit jittery, but the gloom clouding his expression had completely vanished. Bewildered, Mizuha wondered what in the world could've happened.

Katsuragi, meanwhile, gave Sheryl a knowing nod. "Then go ahead and take our seats—we don't mind. And don't worry, Sheryl, we can continue talking business after you and your friends finish catching up. Take your time."

"Thank you very kindly." Sheryl bowed her head in gratitude, and Katsuragi smiled politely as he stood up from his seat. Darius was next to rise, and after he tapped Erio on the shoulder, the boy also vacated his seat. The three of them moved to the next table over. Sheryl gestured to Katsuya and Mizuha. "Go ahead and sit if you'd like. They're empty now, after all."

Katsuya didn't need to be told twice. He took the seat opposite Sheryl without a shred of hesitation. Mizuha was nonplussed, but quickly deduced that this girl had to be the reason for Katsuya's abrupt change in attitude. She took the seat beside Katsuya's.

As they settled in, Sheryl gave him a smile that spoke volumes. “It’s good to see you again, Katsuya.”

“Y-You too...”

“And it looks like once again, you’ve called out to me without any regard for the woman accompanying you, although this is a different woman than the one who was with you before. An older woman too... Expanding our horizons, are we?”

“N-No, that’s not...” Katsuya scrambled to deny it.

His demeanor was no different from that of a normal boy his age, Mizuha realized. The gloom he’d exuded outside the café was nowhere to be seen. Mizuha marveled at this sudden—and drastic—change.

◆

The table now became lively as the three of them exchanged brief introductions and some small talk. They mostly discussed Katsuya’s exploits within Druncam: How, as a fresh new member of the syndicate, the going had been tough at first. How his extraordinary talent, the likes of which were rarely seen, had been discovered through his training and live combat records. How he’d continued to show outstanding results ever since becoming a hunter. How he was adored by the majority of his teammates. How harrowing his encounters in the ruins had been. How the top brass of the syndicate had acknowledged his skill. How the young rookie hunter, brimming with aptitude and potential, would undoubtedly continue to ride the rail of success.

Mizuha led the talk, deliberately painting Katsuya as some kind of hero so that Sheryl would heap praise upon him. Mizuha’s goal was to make Katsuya feel as good about himself as possible before the meet and greet, which she was determined to make a success.

Sheryl played along, offering Katsuya praise as expected of her—so that, through the tales of Katsuya’s exploits, she could get a better idea of the state of affairs inside Druncam, as well as acquire any crumb of information that might be useful to her relic-selling venture.

Although their motives differed, Sheryl and Mizuha’s methods were essentially the same, and so Katsuya found himself being endlessly fawned over by the two women.

But Sheryl noticed that Katsuya seemed to be reacting oddly to their praise. Replacing her courteous smile with an expression of confusion and uncertainty, she adopted a concerned tone. “Katsuya, sorry if I’m wrong, but might I have unwittingly said something to upset you? If so, I apologize.”

Katsuya, who’d been spacing out, returned to his senses to quickly deny it. “What?! No, absolutely not!”

“Really? That’s strange, because it’s felt to me for a while now like whenever I start speaking your mood seems to get worse,” Sheryl replied, lowering the tone of her voice. She looked downcast.

Katsuya’s face went rigid. “Th-That’s not...” But he couldn’t deny it. He knew it was true. Whenever Sheryl started to talk about how great he was, he lost heart. At first, her praise had genuinely thrilled him, and he’d grinned embarrassedly; but the more compliments she gave him, the darker his smile grew.

Mizuha had told Sheryl that he’d received wide acclaim from the sponsors in the city, and had even been appointed as the commander of the unit set to participate in the bounty hunt. She claimed she had no doubt that he’d succeed. But by that point, Katsuya could no longer even force a smile.

Though Sheryl was still wearing her confused yet concerned expression, her inner thoughts were calm and composed. Could she have laid the compliments on a bit *too* thick and embarrassed him in the process? No. Then were there any problems with the way she’d complimented him? No. He was clearly enjoying the praise, but some larger concern on his mind was canceling it out.

Detaching her inner thoughts from her outward expression, she looked melancholy as she methodically observed Mizuha. The woman was clearly worried and frustrated with Katsuya but showed no sign of confusion or surprise. In other words, Mizuha had expected Katsuya to act this way. Moreover, she wasn’t acting reproachful toward Sheryl, so Sheryl knew the fault didn’t lie with her.

Having deduced that much, Sheryl backed off from trying to learn the cause for now and began to consider her next action: Should she engage in further conversation, or excuse herself and leave?

He got into it with Akira before, so I wouldn’t mind ending the

conversation here and cutting ties with him for good, but... She stole a furtive glance at Katsuragi, then returned her gaze to Katsuya and Mizuha. *I'm sure that merchant's watching me like a hawk to see how I'll handle this situation. Breaking things off here will probably earn me a bad grade.* The moment he'd given up his seat, Sheryl had understood what Katsuragi's answer to her request for aid had been—"Manage this on your own." *And if I get a bad grade from Katsuragi, that might have a negative influence on selling the relics for Akira. So, I have no choice but to stay.*

Once she'd made her decision, Sheryl took swift action. Emulating a perfectly natural sadness, as if her own lack of consideration had accidentally hurt a friend, she put on a smile meant to show concern for Katsuya and cheer him up. "Katsuya..." she said gently. "If it really isn't my fault—no, even if it *is*—do you think you could tell me why you're so down?"

Katsuya's gaze met Sheryl's, but he stayed silent.

"I won't force you or anything, but if something's bothering you and you feel like talking about it, I'll listen. That might not solve the problem at hand, but sometimes it helps to talk to someone else about our burdens. And if you want to vent or complain, I won't think any less of you, so feel free to say whatever's on your mind."

That smile of Sheryl's fascinated Katsuya—radiant by design, yet with the slightest hint of gloom. But he still didn't speak up.

"Okay, I understand," she went on. "I'll stop prying, and I apologize for asking too much. Since you see me as a friend, I just wanted to know if there was something I could do to help your pain. But if it's only going to hurt you further, I'd have no right to call myself your friend if I forced you. Although it may already be too late..." Sheryl trailed off. Her smile clouded over, and her face grew burdened with sorrow.

Seeing that his silence had apparently injured her beautiful smile to such an extent, Katsuya spoke despite himself. "That's not true at all! You really did nothing wrong, Sheryl..." He hemmed and hawed a bit. "Well, I don't know if I should talk about it or not, but you're right—something's been bothering me. I'm not sure if I'd even be able to explain it properly, though."

Katsuya looked like he was ready to talk at last, so Sheryl raised her drooping head and showed him a gentle expression. Their eyes met, and

Katsuya steeled his resolve. With a deep breath, he asked her earnestly, “Sheryl, do you think I’m a great hunter?”

Sheryl looked like she hadn’t been expecting that question, but then smiled and nodded. “Yes, I do.”

“You do? Really?”

“Yes. Of course, ‘great’ means different things to different people, but if all those stories I just heard about you aren’t just lies or exaggerations, then you’re a great hunter in my book.”

“I see.” Katsuya grinned sheepishly. “Thanks. But...” He gave a deep sigh, as though expelling some inner anguish, and his face clouded over. “*I* don’t think I am.”

Sheryl and Mizuha looked surprised. Katsuya sighed again before continuing.

“You see, I don’t even know what it means to be a great hunter anymore.” Katsuya had been conflicted for some time, yet he had never been able to tell anyone until now. Feeling a sense of relief that he had finally been able to divulge his secret, he began to explain.

◆

Ever since he could remember, Katsuya had wanted to be a relic hunter. When he heard tales of hunters’ great achievements and imagined them in his head, his heart danced with admiration and eagerness.

After tirelessly devoting himself to his studies and to training to improve his skill, he and some trusted allies eventually headed to a ruin that was enticing enough for them to overlook the dangers.

Exploring the unfamiliar ruin, they battled monsters at least twice their size and managed to overcome all odds to return in one piece with a decent haul of valuable relics. He and his allies had gotten into a small spat over how to spend the reward money, but eventually agreed on how to use the funds optimally to further their progress as hunters. These types of early experiences were like a rite of passage for relic hunters throughout the East. One day, Katsuya hoped to come full circle and rise to the heights of the great hunters he was inspired by, regaling the younger generation with tales of his own achievements. With stars in his eyes, he often imagined what his future self would be like when he achieved that dream.

Having shared his past with Sheryl, he added, “I feel conflicted saying this, but to be honest, I’ve probably already reached that point. I’m apparently the most skilled of all of Druncam’s rookies, I have tons of friends and allies, and it might sound conceited, but I plan to stay on top. I don’t want to lose to any of those lower-ranked hunters.”

In truth, those other hunters would likely have had no chance of catching up to him at this point. The moment he became Druncam’s top rookie, he’d even distinguished himself from the chaff who’d been in the hunter business for many years but had nothing to show for it. He was a rising star, a winner.

“So in that sense, yeah, maybe I am a great hunter.” But now that he’d become the hunter he had always aspired to be, he was forced to contend with the dark reality that lurked behind the legends he’d enjoyed in his youth. “The first time I started to have doubts—well, it wasn’t the first time, actually, but I guess the point where I became *aware* of my doubts was during an emergency job with the Kugamayama defense force.” His voice became hollow. “Some of my teammates ended up dying. I couldn’t save them.”

The very same teammates who had shared meals with him in the cafeteria, trained with him to the point of exhaustion, helped him search for relics in dangerous ruins, and had his back during tough fights with strong monsters had been brutally slaughtered in quick succession. One had been blown to fragments by a monster’s artillery shell. Another had fought back madly as a monster devoured them. Yet another had misjudged the severity of their injuries and accidentally overdosed on medicine, even though their wounds hadn’t actually been fatal.

None of those rose-colored legends of heroic relic hunters, of awe-inspiring survivors, had ever mentioned the dead.

“At the time, I told myself that it was okay, that I just needed to become a strong enough hunter, a great enough hunter, to save everyone. That was what I’d thought, but...” He paused. “But I was wrong. More of my friends died. I still couldn’t save them.”

Many hunters ended up washing their hands of the profession the first time they lost a good friend or ally, with the majority of them saying that they were simply unable to bear the guilt of having let their comrade die. A large number of others, even if they didn’t quit hunting entirely, ended up

going it alone, afraid of losing someone else precious to them.

"I really am happy you think I'm a great hunter, Sheryl. But how can I call myself that if I can't even keep my friends from dying? I've thought about it a lot and have come to the conclusion that all the accolades and praise in the world are meaningless if I can't even keep those I care about alive. *That's* the reason."

The events at the Yonozuka Station Ruins had left a deep scar on Katsuya's heart. Not only had he not been able to save his teammates back then—he felt he'd abandoned them to their deaths. When he'd returned home and started seeing visions of them, he'd felt a strong resentment coming from them, as though they were telling him that his allies were as good as dead on his watch, that he deserved to be all alone.

But he felt that even if he quit being a hunter, or only operated solo from now on, it would be the same as abandoning his other teammates. He couldn't bring himself to do that. So those negative thoughts and the accusing apparitions of the allies he'd failed to save had continued to chase him until finally he could run no more.

◆

On the surface, Sheryl looked to Katsuya like she sympathized with his plight. But deep down, she was analyzing his story, digesting it, and considering how to react. In the end, she found herself disillusioned and disgusted.

In other words, this spoiled brat thought everything would go perfectly if he just put in the effort, but now that he's run into a few situations where that didn't cut it, he's all depressed? Talk about conceited.

As far as Sheryl could tell, perhaps in terms of raw talent and results Katsuya was a skilled enough hunter to justify his arrogance. But when commendations and accolades had become so commonplace that Katsuya took them as a given, his own inflated ego had caused him to suffer.

Perhaps that hubris is why his teammates are so taken with him too. Or, well, more like dependent on him. Relic hunters constantly courted danger, and in the midst of harrowing moments, Katsuya's bravado often encouraged both himself and his teammates. And so extraordinarily talented was he that he made his boasts a reality. Naturally, then, his peers sang his

praises when he rescued them from danger. They came to rely on him to save them. When he aided them over and over again, they ended up counting on his presence. Discarding their fears, clinging to the hope he gave them, they became deeply attached to him. For as long as he was with them, everything would work out.

In other words, he's suffering from success, Sheryl mused. Katsuya thought incredibly highly of himself and took on more than most people could handle, but his real curse was that he actually had the talent to back it up. And each time he succeeded, even more people anticipated greater things from him.

Eventually, those expectations had exceeded the scope of his talent. The bar had gotten so high that the boy was no longer able to reach it—so it seemed to Sheryl.

After briefly reflecting, she made a decision. Turning a stern face toward the boy, she spoke firmly. "Katsuya, I'm about to tell you what I think after hearing your story. I might end up saying something untrue or completely off base, so if I do, feel free to either disregard what I say or ridicule me."

Katsuya raised his head to look at Sheryl and saw her gaze boring into him. A little intimidated, he nonetheless indicated he was ready to hear her opinion. In this way, they stared at each other for a while. Just as the pervading silence was beginning to put Katsuya on edge, Sheryl's look softened into a smile, and she bowed deeply.

"Thank you so much for your tireless efforts in keeping the city safe. You and your comrades, and all those who fought and died for the sake of protecting our home, deserve our heartfelt gratitude. Really, I can't thank you enough."

Katsuya was stunned. Her sudden thanks had taken him completely off guard.

Sheryl raised her head and met his gaze directly once more. "If you relic hunters hadn't taken care of those monsters, the city would've suffered great damage. Of course, I know many have other motives, like lots of reward money, getting your name out there, or perhaps escaping financial trouble." Sheryl chose her words carefully so that Katsuya couldn't reply that he'd fought for his own goals and thus didn't deserve her thanks. "Even so, you risked your lives all the same," she continued, bowing her head again. "Some of you even lost your lives protecting us. There's no way we

could ever repay you for that."

Katsuya realized her words were shaking him to his core, though he wasn't sure why.

"As long as you continue your career as a hunter, death will follow you wherever you go. Perhaps some would say that coming to terms with this is part of the job," she conjectured, then added, "But not everyone who becomes a hunter possesses that resolve. Some have no other choice, and others end up dying because they lack the skill and resolve to even survive." Making sure to appear sympathetic to Katsuya's situation, she continued, "And even if they do possess those things, they could still run into misfortune and perish. The comrades you weren't able to rescue in time probably fell into that category—they were just unlucky."

Katsuya felt the burden lift from his shoulders a little—though, again, he wasn't sure why.

"I don't have any way of knowing how you felt about those colleagues you lost, but if you were proud to fight alongside them with your life on the line, then you should always keep your memories of them in your heart." Thus far, Sheryl had been speaking with a smile that seemed to honor their memory. But now her face grew serious once more. "However, if that's not the case and their deaths are dragging you down—holding you back—then purge them from your mind at once!"

After a moment of stunned silence, Katsuya flared up in anger. "Purge them?! They're my allies, my friends! You're telling me to just up and forget them?!" Her suggestion struck him as outrageous, and his fury only grew at the thought that she was spitting on the honor of his deceased friends. Normally Katsuya would never have reacted so excessively.

But Sheryl didn't even flinch—in fact, the look in her eyes grew even more intense as she gazed at the hunter, causing *him* to recoil instead. His anger died down, and he regained his composure.

Then, in a grim voice, Sheryl continued. "I'll say it again: If you feel proud of your comrades, then there's no issue. Those memories will surely save you someday. They'll be what keeps you going against impossible odds. They'll be the strength that allows you to keep fighting when all seems lost."

A hint of sadness crept into her grim expression. "But if your grief and regret at not being able to save them hinder your performance, then those

memories will kill you in the end, Katsuya. You need to dispose of them before that happens," she implored him, her intense stare and expression unchanged. "They'll become chains that cause you to stumble when you need to move forward, and you'll die! They'll shackle your feet to the floor when you need to retreat, and you'll die! So just forget them! You can yell at me all you want, you can hurl insults at me until you're satisfied—as long as you forget!"

Katsuya listened to Sheryl without interrupting. The grief from losing his comrades still remained in his heart. But now, he found, it no longer drove him to blame himself.

Sheryl saw he didn't intend to argue, and her face relaxed. "I won't tell you that you need to live for the sake of the dead or anything. But you ought to live for the sake of the living. Like those two, for instance. They've been worried about you all this time, you know?" Sheryl pointed behind Katsuya. He turned to look, and was shocked to see Yumina and Airi standing there.

"Ah, er, well... Actually, we've been here for a bit now, but it didn't seem appropriate to interrupt..." Yumina forced a smile as she tried to gloss over the fact that they had been eavesdropping. Airi nodded firmly, her expression neutral as usual.

Katsuya felt like he was seeing them for the first time in a long while. He finally realized just how consumed by grief and self-loathing he'd been, and how much he must have made Yumina and Airi worry.

He could still see his dead comrades. But he was no longer afraid.

◆

He hadn't been able to save them. They probably despised him for that. Dwelling on such thoughts, Katsuya had assumed that the faces of his dead friends were reproaching him.

The deep regret of being unable to respond in time had subconsciously made him crave the torment of rebuke. His mind had conjured hallucinations of his missing colleagues so that they could endlessly blame him for not being able to rescue them. Thus, the delusions in his vision were nothing more than reflections of his own desires and prejudices. His weakness had transformed his dear friends into malevolent spirits. Once Katsuya finally realized all this, he saw everything differently.

His deceased teammates didn't want him to die. And even if by some chance they did, he couldn't abandon the ones that were still alive. *Sorry*, he apologized to them in his heart. *I have to stay here for now.*

The friends in his vision all smiled in response. *That's fine with us*, they seemed to say, and slowly dissipated into the ether.

No longer bound by the past, Katsuya grinned. It was a look Yumina and

Airi hadn't seen in a long time—the same grin, in fact, that had made them fall for him in the first place. Then he turned to face Sheryl one more time and declared, "I won't forget. They'll always be in my heart."

Before her, Sheryl saw a boy who'd accepted he had woes and regrets—and kept smiling despite them. Seeing his happiness restored, Sheryl beamed back at him. "You're really a nice guy, Katsuya. To be honest, I was fully prepared for you to lash out at me and scream that outsiders had no business butting into your affairs or something."

"Wait, what? So..." Katsuya was stunned. "What'd you say all that for then?"

"I figured that even if you did blow up on me, you'd be letting off some steam, which might make you feel better in the end anyway. But it seems like I didn't have to worry in the first place," Sheryl replied easily, flashing another smile.

Katsuya felt like he'd been hit by a shock wave. The girl before him had managed to excise every bit of the anguish that had tormented him for so long. She'd been prepared to anger a hunter she barely knew—aware that some hunters would kill civilians without even batting an eye—if it meant relieving him of his suffering. She'd prioritized his happiness over her own safety. He felt something lightly stir within him.

Wearing a dumbstruck expression, he kept gawking at Sheryl without meaning to. She merely looked him in the eyes and smiled. Katsuya grinned back to hide how bashful that smile made him.

◆

Within the world of pure white, a girl was sulking.

By supplementing an observer's perception of a physical object with additional data, it was possible to get the observer to perceive the object as something completely different. And transforming one's understanding of a concept that had no physical form was even simpler—you just needed to rewrite the perception of the observer.

"That was uncalled for," the girl pouted.

For the observer's perception had been rewritten.

Chapter 90: Revelation

Seeing that Katsuya's enthusiasm had returned after his conversation with Sheryl, Mizuha excused herself from the table, and Yumina and Airi took her place. There was still time before the start of the meet and greet—or rather, before Katsuya would make his grand debut—so Mizuha had suggested Katsuya and the girls chat in the meantime.

In fact, Katsuya was in even higher spirits than normal, perky and full of energy, while Sheryl continued to wear her elegant smile. And Airi was her usual, if expressionless, self. Yumina seemed the only one who couldn't relax.

Katsuya noticed and found her attitude a bit odd. "Yumina, what's wrong?"

"Hm? Oh, nothing." Smiling to hide how she really felt, she bowed to Sheryl. "Thank you very much for listening to Katsuya's troubles. You've really helped him out."

Yumina had realized what had been eating at Katsuya, but had hesitated to tell him what Sheryl had: to forget his comrades or not to let their deaths get to him. There were two reasons: First, she knew that if she didn't choose her words carefully, she'd only earn his ire. And second, even if the best option *had* been to suggest such a thing, she couldn't do it if it meant that one day, when she died, he'd forget her as well.

Naturally, she didn't want Katsuya to shoulder the burden of her death. But she couldn't bear the thought of Katsuya forgetting she ever existed, only vaguely able to even recall her memory.

"You have my thanks as well," Airi said, bowing to Sheryl. Airi had also more or less deduced what had been bothering Katsuya, but hadn't said anything because she felt it was something he needed to get used to sooner or later.

Airi didn't feel as much grief toward the deaths of her comrades as the others did. Humans died when it was time for them to die—this was an incontrovertible fact of nature. Even if that person happened to be someone

you were laughing and joking with the previous day, you'd eventually get over the grief of their absence and move on. After all, if you weren't able to reconcile those deaths, you'd never be able to survive.

Such was Airi's line of thinking—but at the same time, a part of her *didn't* want Katsuya to dismiss her death as merely a natural event. She *wanted* him to keep grieving for her when she passed away. When she'd seen him in utter despair over his comrades' deaths, she'd even hoped that one day he'd feel the same way about her when it was her time. So contrary to her own philosophy, she couldn't bring herself to tell him that he should get used to the idea of his teammates dying on him either.

But through talking with Sheryl, Katsuya had acquired the strength to accept those deaths. Yumina and Airi felt truly relieved to see his resolve restored, and inwardly they breathed a half-conscious sigh of relief. Now they no longer had to worry about being forgotten.

"It was nothing. I'm just glad that I was able to help," Sheryl responded with her elegant smile.

That smile. It made Yumina feel conflicted. She was grateful to Sheryl for dispelling Katsuya's worries, true. And she already knew he would hold Sheryl in even higher regard after this.

But in just two encounters, Sheryl had achieved what Yumina, his longtime friend, could not. Yumina couldn't help but feel jealous and frustrated with herself. Was she so worthless to him that all those years they'd spent together amounted to nothing in the end?

No, no, I can't think like that. Katsuya's back to his cheerful self, and that's all that matters. Sheryl, at least, didn't seem to see Katsuya as a romantic target, so she didn't have to worry—or so Yumina told herself.

The food they'd requested arrived at the table. Katsuya was supposed to head to the reception shortly, but since there wouldn't be any meal there, he wanted to grab a bite so he wouldn't get hungry during the event. Yumina and Airi, however, weren't participating in the meet and greet at all, so they'd ordered with reckless abandon. After all, Mizuha was footing the bill—or rather, Druncam was, since their food counted as a company expense.

But only a small coffee cup was set in front of Sheryl. She'd paid for it out of her own pocket, even though Mizuha had offered to treat her as well.

Katsuya raised his eyebrows. "Is that all you're having, Sheryl? Just

coffee?”

“Yes. Don’t worry about me, I’m fine,” she said with a smile. In truth, she had really wanted to be treated, to order all the most expensive items on the menu without restraint. But right now, she was supposed to be a graceful, noble lady. She couldn’t risk ordering something she thought noble ladies would eat only to be severely mistaken, nor get something expensive without knowing the proper way to eat it. That would out her as a slum girl in an instant. So she had no choice but to endure.

And if she’d accepted Mizuha’s offer and let her pay, her noble, affluent lifestyle might be called into question, so she’d reluctantly declined. But it would have been equally suspicious if she hadn’t gotten anything at all. So even if she didn’t know the proper dining etiquette, she figured she should at least be able to make it through by ordering a coffee.

She couldn’t help noticing the trays of food set in front of Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi. However, it would be unnatural for a woman of her class and upbringing to gawk at them as if they were the most delicious things she’d ever seen. Desperately restraining herself from looking directly at the food or showing any excessive reaction, she kept up her elegant smile.

But Katsuya had picked up on something else. Now that he had calmed down and gotten a good look at Sheryl’s clothes, he could see they clearly gave off a different aura than the standard store-bought variety. This reminded him that she (supposedly) lived within the city walls, and so perhaps this common fare couldn’t satisfy her exacting palate. “This café might be relatively on the cheap side, but I actually think the food here’s pretty good. Is it not to your taste, Sheryl?”

Sheryl was stunned, and it took every effort not to let it show in her face. *Cheap?! This coffee alone was 1,500 aurum! Just how warped is your sense of money, anyway?!* The coffers of skilled hunters really were on a completely different level from her own, it seemed. *No wonder Akira was able to buy boxes of medicine for two million aurum without batting an eye,* she thought, astonished. Even so, she concealed her shock and lightly shook her head. “No, nothing like that,” she said timidly, then looked bashful. “It’s not the quality of the food or anything. I’m just, you know, watching my figure...”

But Katsuya didn’t catch on right away. “Your figure? What do you mean?”

“Katsuya, quiet,” Yumina warned.

“You really ought to think a bit more before speaking,” Airi scolded.

Under their reproachful gazes, Katsuya belatedly realized his mistake and tried to talk his way out. “I-I mean, you don’t look fat to me, Sheryl, and well, I think it’s healthier to be rounded out in certain places anyway __”

“Katsuya, shut up this instant!”

“You *really* ought to think more before speaking!”

Katsuya got the sense he was only making things worse and finally shut his mouth, afraid of aggravating the situation any further.

With a bitter smile, Yumina turned to Sheryl. “Sorry about that. You’ve probably realized this by now, but that’s just the kind of guy Katsuya is. It might sound like I’m making excuses for him, but he really didn’t mean any harm. He just has a tendency to say a little bit more than he needs to— Oh, who am I kidding? Katsuya, what’s wrong with you?! Didn’t you learn anything from last time?”

“S-Sorry, Yumina. Sheryl, I apologize.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Sheryl. “It’s not every day we get to chat like this, so let’s enjoy an open and leisurely conversation.” Relieved that she had managed to successfully conceal her own feelings, Sheryl started adding milk and sugar to her coffee.

Katsuya, Airi, and Yumina watched in surprise, which gradually grew into pure bewilderment. The cup of coffee was so tiny that even Sheryl’s small hand could entirely conceal it, and the cup was only about seventy percent full. Yet Sheryl continued to add her milk and sugar until the level rose to eighty percent—then ninety—and then finally the entire cup was filled to the brim. Here was a cup of coffee with so much milk and sugar that some might consider it blasphemy against coffee itself—in fact, they might wonder whether the liquid in the cup could even be called coffee anymore as she brought it to her lips.

She smiled as though it was truly delicious. At any other time, that smile might have made Katsuya fall for her once more. But now a different kind of emotion took precedence—uneasiness.

Sheryl noticed their gazes upon her. “Um, is something wrong?”

“Umm... I-Isn’t that, well, kind of sweet?” Yumina ventured to ask.

Sheryl seemed to find her question strange. “Yes, and?”

“No, that’s not what I... Sorry, never mind.” She wanted to ask if the drink was *too* sweet, but saw that the answer was obvious and gave up.

Flummoxed, Katsuya gave it a try. “U-Um, do you like sweet stuff, Sheryl?”

“Yes, I *love* sweet things,” Sheryl replied honestly, with another smile that could have captivated him right then—but this time he was too busy imagining that disgustingly sweet coffee on his own taste buds for her charm to affect him.

“O-Oh, really?” he continued, as if trying to forget an unpleasant sensation. “Well, that makes sense. A lot of my comrades are women, and they all like sweet stuff too. You move around a lot as a hunter, y’see, and some medicines that heal wounds and replenish stamina are more effective when you burn more energy, so some of ’em eat as much as they want—truckloads, even—without worrying about calories...” As Katsuya babbled on, he and the others tried not to look at Sheryl’s cup, desperate to quell the intolerable sweetness that threatened to overwhelm their tongues.

◆

Meanwhile, Katsuragi had been watching Sheryl and the others from another table, and he was astonished at what he’d seen. “Decent observation skills” didn’t even begin to scratch the surface of what she’d demonstrated—not only had Sheryl been able to conceal her true identity from a Druncam executive and fool her into thinking she was a noble rich girl, she’d also managed to win the trust of hunters who the executive strongly favored. Her clothing, made from Old World material, had likely been a factor, but that alone wouldn’t have been enough to deceive them all so skillfully. Had he not known who Sheryl really was, he probably would’ve been deceived too, he reflected, and he felt a chill down his spine.

Man, she’s scary. To think she was able to handle that whole conversation without letting even a shred of her true feelings show! If I hadn’t seen what she’s like as the boss of her gang, there’s no way I would’ve known that was all an act.

He glanced over at Darius and Erio. Both of them wore tense looks that suggested they were thinking along the same lines. Suddenly aware of his own expression, Katsuragi tried to hide the taut half smile on his face by

suddenly forcing a merchant's grin.

At that moment, Mizuha, who had vacated her table to make space for Yumina and Airi, approached him. "Mind if I sit here?" she asked.

Katsuragi quickly stood and indicated she could sit in the seat opposite him. "Oh, no, go right ahead, by all means!" He then gave Darius a look. *Don't say anything unnecessary*, it said, *and don't let Erio run his mouth either.* Darius grinned wryly and gave a barely perceptible nod.

When she had taken her seat, Katsuragi immediately opened with some flattery. "Nice to meet you. My name is Katsuragi. You're a friend of Miss Sheryl's, I take it? It's such a pleasure to make your acquaintance. If you don't mind, may I ask how you came to know Miss Sheryl? No, don't worry, there's no deeper meaning behind that question. I just wondered if our meeting like this today might be destiny..."

Mizuha was an executive, the type (she believed) that the likes of Katsuragi would normally never get the chance to meet. In her eyes, he was probably just a small-time merchant desperate to build some kind of rapport with her due to her status. Suspecting he'd only become a nuisance if she let him cling to her, she chose her words carefully.

"Yes, well, perhaps it is. Oh, forgive me for not introducing myself sooner—I'm Mizuha. I mostly handle office work at Druncam." She didn't deny being one of Sheryl's friends, but she didn't explicitly affirm it either.

Katsuragi feigned exaggerated surprise. "Druncam, you say! Now, when you say 'office work,' is that in any way related to procuring equipment, perhaps? As it happens, I deal in such equipment, and—"

"I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid I'm a bit uncomfortable talking business in public," she said, cutting him off. "I unceremoniously interrupted your negotiations with her earlier, so talking shop with you now would be rather rude to her, wouldn't it?"

"O-Oh, I suppose you're right. My apologies—that was rather inconsiderate of me."

By this time, Katsuragi and Mizuha both wore amicable smiles as they felt each other out, trading half-truths and outright fabrications.

"Incidentally, Mr. Katsuragi," Mizuha began, "exactly what kind of discussion were you having with Sheryl, if you don't mind me asking? Forgive me, but I find it odd that she'd be involved with procuring equipment meant for hunters. And surely there could be more suitable

places for holding such a discussion?”

Essentially, Mizuha was asking, *Were you discussing real business, or roping her into some sort of scam?* But for Katsuragi, that was all the proof he needed to confirm that Mizuha truly believed Sheryl wealthy enough to be a potential target for a swindle. In other words, while she doubted Katsuragi, she didn’t doubt Sheryl’s upbringing or status.

So Katsuragi made a show of being flustered. “Ah, w-well, that is to say... Sh-She asked me for some advice on selling relics, so I invited her here to discuss the ins and outs of the relic trade. This is as far within the walls as we’re able to go to meet her, after all, and we didn’t want her to have to come too far.”

Katsuragi’s overt nervousness was meant to suggest that he was hiding something, while his words implied that Sheryl lived within the city walls. Mizuha didn’t doubt either of these conclusions. Katsuragi was leading her by the nose. But she did harbor another doubt.

“The relic trade, you say? What kind of relics was she planning on selling, exactly?”

“Oh, you know, this and that. If I were to give a specific example—well, just look at her outfit.”

Mizuha did as he suggested and reexamined Sheryl’s clothes. It was clear at a glance that the material was high-quality and had been very expensive. Yet its overall design had such a modern sensibility that she failed to see it as Old World clothing, and wondered what connection it had with relics.

“It’s a magnificent outfit. Very fashionable and upper-crust. What about it?”

Katsuragi assumed a deliberate look of surprise. “Is that really all you have to say?”

“Is there more to it?” Mizuha asked, unsure what he was getting at.

The merchant acted like he couldn’t believe his ears. “More to it?! These clothes were tailored using articles of Old World apparel as material. Apparently, they cost one and a half million aurum just to fashion. I can’t even imagine what it would’ve cost if the material itself was included in that price.”

Incredulous, Mizuha took another look at Sheryl’s outfit. Now that she’d heard his explanation, she could certainly see these clothes fetching an

exorbitant price. She cursed inwardly at her mistake, but nevertheless maintained her composure. “Wouldn’t turning Old World relics into an outfit ruin their worth, though?” she asked.

“Of course. That just means she’s well-off enough to do so without worrying about things like value. But I’m sure you already know this, as her friend?” *A real friend of Sheryl’s would already know something so basic.* Katsuragi was implicitly calling Mizuha’s friendship with Sheryl into question.

Mizuha, of course, couldn’t admit this far in that they really weren’t friends, so instead she bit back. “Of course I do. I just found it a bit strange that she’d devalue relics she intended to sell. You did say she was asking you for advice on selling them, right?”

“Huh? O-Oh, that. Yes, and I let her know it was a bad move, of course. Not everyone is financially secure enough to spend their money that way, after all.”

“Of course.” Mizuha felt satisfied that her counterattack had been effective.

“I knew you’d understand.” Katsuragi, for his part, was confident that he’d fooled Mizuha.

In the end, they were both relieved that they’d managed to successfully deceive one another, stacking falsehoods upon falsehoods—and at the apex of that stack stood Sheryl’s status, risen to impossible heights.

◆

The four young people kept chatting casually until Mizuha announced it was nearly time for the meet and greet. Then, noting the infatuated gaze Katsuya was giving Sheryl, Mizuha added:

“Sheryl, if you’re not busy, would you like to come to the reception as well? Now that you two have gotten to know each other better, I’m sure Katsuya would be thrilled.” Mizuha figured that Sheryl’s presence would make Katsuya much more gung ho about attending.

And true to her expectations, Katsuya immediately leaned forward in excitement.

But Sheryl merely shook her head. “I’m very sorry. I’m thrilled that you would invite me, but I have to decline, as I’m in the middle of a business

discussion with Katsuragi right now, you see."

"Really? Aww..." Katsuya was visibly disappointed.

At that, Sheryl smiled wryly. "Katsuya, you already have a pretty girl on each arm, so I recommend showing more self-restraint going forward. At least, if I were you, I'd refrain from picking up yet another one at this event you're heading to. But if that's the type of guy you want to sell yourself as, I won't stop you."

Katsuya looked panicked. "I-I wouldn't do that! In the first place, it's not like Yumina and Airi are even gonna be—" He belatedly realized something was strange. "Wait a sec..." Mizuha had told him that Yumina and Airi wouldn't be attending the meet and greet—but then why were they here?

A bit earlier, Yumina, worried about how glum Katsuya had been as of late, had gotten wind that Mizuha had carried him off somewhere, and had gone after him with Airi. While Yumina hadn't had any idea where to find the boy, Airi had somehow seemed to know. So, trusting her comrade, Yumina had followed her lead, assuming that Airi had already done some digging to figure out where Katsuya and Mizuha were headed. When they'd arrived, Mizuha had assumed they'd somehow figured out where she and Katsuya were headed, and she thought no further of it.

But in truth, Airi hadn't known where Katsuya was either—she'd simply sensed his location and gone to it. As for *how* she could do this, no one else had asked, and Airi herself hadn't really worried about it, so it remained a mystery.

Mizuha interjected once more. "Looks like it's time to get ready. You can wear the powered suit you have on, Katsuya, but you two should probably change." She turned to Yumina and Airi. In fact, she hadn't wanted to let the two of them participate—Airi was from the slums, and Mizuha had suspected the backers might be unhappy if someone like her came along. Yumina and Airi had realized this on their own and hadn't objected, aware of where they stood in the pecking order.

Yet Katsuya, Mizuha knew, couldn't pick up on such subtleties. If she told him the real reason they couldn't come, he'd undoubtedly fly off the handle. So she'd just told him he was attending as their team's representative.

But now that Sheryl had turned up, Mizuha had changed her mind.

Judging from how Sheryl had thanked Katsuya and the city defense force for their tireless efforts, it was clear she held no contempt toward the people of the slums. Mizuha worried that Sheryl might take excluding Yumina and Airi as an act of discrimination against residents of the slums—she could even become furious if she sensed that Airi had been denied entry due to prejudice. The executive wanted to avoid that—after all, who knew what kind of influence Sheryl wielded among the upper class? And if Katsuya backed Sheryl, things would get even more out of hand. Better to let Yumina and Airi participate as Katsuya's cheerleaders, and let them fawn over him throughout the event.

Mizuha determined all of this in a split second and whisked the two girls away from the scene before they could protest or say anything unnecessary. As she pushed them from behind, she said, "Katsuya, we're going on ahead to change into more appropriate attire. I know there's still a bit of time before the event starts, but don't be late."

"R-Right. I'll be there." Katsuya found her behavior a bit strange, but didn't think on it any further and just waved them goodbye.

Sheryl was left staring at Katsuya, who remained behind.

Seriously?! Wasn't he supposed to go with them just now? she thought. Knowing how infatuated those two girls were with him, his indifference toward their feelings seriously rubbed her the wrong way. As her opinion of him sank even lower, she suddenly wondered, *What would Akira do in his situation?*

But she abandoned that train of thought as soon as she'd boarded it, deciding she didn't want to find out. If Akira ever treated her the same way, she'd have to decide if it was due to his awkward, insensitive personality, or because he simply didn't care about her. And she didn't want to go down that road. Of course, she knew her reluctance in itself indicated that the second option seemed far more likely to her.

Meanwhile, Katsuya looked like he wanted to say something but was tongue-tied. Finally, looking dead serious, he managed to say, "I'll be heading out here pretty soon too, but before then, can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

Katsuya hesitated for a moment, but then steeled himself. "The truth is,

for a while now my performance as a hunter has wildly varied between good and bad. I don't want you to take this weirdly—or rather, it's not always like this or anything—but it seems that whether it's during training or out on the field, I perform much better on my own. Why do you think that is?"

Why should I care? Sheryl thought, but made sure not to let it show on her face, and instead pretended to mull it over.

"You don't think it's your imagination or you're just overthinking it?" she said at last.

"No, that can't be," he said. "The difference is so obvious that I can clearly tell."

"But it's not like you always perform well when you're alone, and always perform badly when with others, right?"

"Yeah, but it's not just in my head. I'm positive," Katsuya replied with absolute certainty.

What a pain! Sheryl thought. But she also knew that if she didn't come up with something believable, he'd never leave her alone, so she racked her brain for a suitable answer.

"This is just a wild guess," she finally said, "and it might upset you when you hear it. Do you still want me to say it?"

"I don't mind. And I won't get mad. You have my absolute word on that," he said sincerely. This was still a concern of his (though perhaps not as severe as the one that had been plaguing him earlier), and he'd been unable to find a solution before now. And just like the previous problem, this was something he couldn't discuss with Yumina and Airi. He could never admit to them that when they were together, his performance suffered.

So Katsuya now turned to Sheryl—his savior, who'd drawn him up out of anguish so severe he'd had constant nightmares and hallucinations—with a level of faith bordering on devotion. *If it's Sheryl, she'll be able to help me*, he hoped—even prayed—expectantly.

And Sheryl came through with a revelation. "It's probably because you're always feeling like you need to protect your comrades."

"H-Huh?" This time he was more stunned than angry.

Sheryl explained that when Katsuya was working alone, he was able to focus one hundred percent of his skill on himself. But when with his

comrades, he spent seventy or eighty percent—or at worst ninety percent—on keeping them safe, leaving only the remainder for himself. Katsuya might have thought that he and his teammates were helping each other out, but the reality was that he was actually playing guardian for everyone else. He was always overprotective of his comrades, and since he typically operated as part of a team, that meant it was normal for him to not display his peak performance. Only when he was by himself and didn't have anyone to protect did that burden vanish and his performance improve.

Judging by how wracked with guilt he'd been over not being able to save his comrades, he'd probably been exerting every effort to protect them on a daily basis. He'd completely exhausted his energy just making sure all his teammates were safe and sound.

Then why did he sometimes perform poorly even when he was by himself? Because even when they were elsewhere, he couldn't help but worry about the well-being of his comrades. And conversely, whenever he was on a team and ended up performing well, it meant he'd subconsciously determined for whatever reason that those on his team didn't need protecting.

Having wrapped up her explanation, Sheryl watched Katsuya's reaction. He didn't seem upset.

In fact, Katsuya was shell-shocked. Parts of her explanation *did* sound preposterous and seem hard to swallow—could striving to keep his comrades safe really render him too weak to protect them? But since it was Sheryl who'd said it, he couldn't help wondering if it was true. After some consideration, there was no longer any room for doubt in his mind—some of what she was saying made sense, while other conclusions of hers merely confirmed what he'd long suspected.

After all, during his struggle in the giant hole at Yonozuka, he'd been with Yumina and the others, but probably hadn't had the leeway to think about protecting anyone else—thus he'd still been able to bring out his full potential. So, too, when he'd fought alongside Akira—even though the circumstances had made them allies, he hadn't once considered protecting the other boy. Before he knew it, he could no longer see any other possible answer.

But Sheryl wasn't finished. "I'm not really sure if I should be saying this to someone who just got appointed to command a large unit of people, but

in my personal opinion, you're simply not fit to be a leader."

She proceeded to elaborate. If, hypothetically, Katsuya ended up in charge of a group of a hundred people on the bounty hunt and tried to protect each individual teammate, he would have his hands full merely watching over them and would be unable to focus on commanding his unit. And if he had to choose to abandon one of them to save the other ninety-nine, he wouldn't be able to. Even in a hopeless situation, he'd most likely bank on the exceedingly slim possibility that he'd be able to save everyone, and end up causing more casualties as a result.

Katsuya imagined this scenario in his head, and it played out exactly as she'd said. His face went rigid.

"S-So what should I do, then?" Katsuya asked, hoping that her answer would save him once again.

Why are you asking me*?!* Sheryl thought when she heard Katsuya's question, but she answered anyway. He might try to change the way he perceived his teammates—not solely thinking of protecting them, but trusting them to have his back sometimes as well. If that was too much to ask, he could try visualizing everyone as himself—because if they were each him, he wouldn't have to worry about their performance.

After all, Sheryl explained, when you were the leader of a unit, it mattered less what orders you gave and more whether your subordinates followed them. No matter how meticulous the plan, it would all come to naught if the team had no faith in it and moved of their own accord. Conversely, sometimes a seemingly half-baked strategy turned out to be more effective than a well-thought-out one because the chain of command was airtight. If Katsuya was so well-liked as a leader, perhaps the best course of action for him would be to tell his unit, "I'll take responsibility if we fail, so follow my orders at all costs."

And if he just couldn't bring himself to abandon anyone, then he needed to aim higher than just being a "great hunter." He needed to be an *extraordinary* hunter, with the strength not only to successfully serve as a decoy for his other ninety-nine teammates, but to keep himself alive while carrying that burden.

"That's about all I can think of right now," Sheryl told him. "But in the end, it's amateurish advice. Feel free to laugh at it and forget I said

anything.” She gave him a gentle smile, thinking what she’d said was foolish and looking for a quick out.

But Katsuya’s reaction was oddly positive—he nodded, as though convinced. “I see. So that’s all I have to do, then?” He beamed. “Thanks, Sheryl. You’ve saved me.”

“Y-You’re welcome?” Sheryl felt shaken by his response and couldn’t fully mask her shock. She could detect something bizarre in the confident smile on his handsome face. And once she noticed it, she couldn’t ignore it.

What in the...? Is this really Katsuya? So drastically had he transformed that it was hard to believe he was the same person.

“Thanks for listening, Sheryl. It’s time for me to go now.” Then he smiled bashfully, looking directly at her. “Just one more question—do you think we can meet again sometime?”

In an effort to regain her composure, Sheryl decided to tease him. With a knowing smile, she asked, “Oh, now you’re asking me out?”

“O-Of course not! I just—thought it’d be nice if we could meet and talk like this again someday.”

“I’m kidding. Yes, let us meet again, if the opportunity presents itself. Good luck on the bounty hunt!”

“Thanks, Sheryl. See you!” With that, Katsuya got up and left the café.

Sheryl watched him go with her elegant smile still plastered on her face—but the moment he vanished, the smile did too, and her expression twisted in utter bafflement.

“What in the world was that?” she asked aloud.

But there was no one else left to answer her.

Ultimately, the meet and greet turned out to be a resounding success. Katsuya was more fired up than ever before, and everyone praised his boundless energy and ambition. But while Yumina was just as overjoyed as the rest of them that Katsuya was in such great spirits, she alone found the drastic change that had come over him bizarre.

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When Sheryl returned to her base and entered her room, she breathed a sigh.

Then Erio appeared at the door, looking troubled.

"What's wrong, Erio?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing. I just had something I wanted to ask you." Contrary to his words, however, he seemed nervous and hesitant as he opened and closed his mouth several times.

"What is it?" Sheryl asked again, puzzled by his behavior. "I'm really tired, so if you want to say something, then hurry up and say it."

"Ah, sorry. Well, um, when you were talking with that Katsuya guy back there, you said a bunch of stuff, but how much of that was how you actually felt?"

"How I actually felt?" Sheryl didn't immediately grasp his meaning, and the confusion showed on her face. "Sorry, Erio, why are you asking me this?"

"Oh—well, that guy was so worked up over his teammates dying on him, and yet you seemed so sincere when you told him to forget them, and don't worry about them, and stuff."

"Oh, you mean when he was whining over losing his teammates, so I put on that little do-gooder act and told him to quit moping about it and look forward instead of backward for once?"

"A-A little do-gooder act?" Erio looked at once shocked and bewildered.

"Oh, come on, Erio," she said, exasperated. "Do you really think I'd say something like that for real? Get a grip!"

"B-But you even thanked him for defending the city, and you said we would've been in danger if those monsters had reached the city. Wasn't that the truth?"

"Do you really think the slums are included when they pledge to keep the city safe?" asked Sheryl. "Of course not. If the monsters ever reached that far, we'd either be offered up as meat shields or wiped out along with the monsters. Those folks don't deserve our thanks."

"Maybe other hunters might do that," Erio mused, "but that guy's different. He tried to defend the slums too, didn't he?"

It was then that Sheryl finally noticed something was off with Erio. For the time being, she played along in order to find out exactly what. "Well, perhaps," she said.

A slight reproach entered Erio's gaze, and he flared up. "'Perhaps'? It's the truth! There's no way someone who beat himself up that much over not

being able to protect his comrades wouldn't protect us as well!"

The conversation had veered off in an odd direction—Erio was starting to show unmistakable signs of admiration for Katsuya. Sheryl couldn't help but feel perplexed. With a rebuking scowl, she moved to nip it in the bud.

"Erio, before you say anything further, I'll let you know this right now. If you're thinking that you want Katsuya to back our gang like Akira, forget it. It's never going to happen."

Sheryl's tone brooked no argument. The force behind her words made Erio flinch, and he came back to his senses.

"H-Huh? It's not?"

"Absolutely not. What makes you think that'd even be possible?" she demanded.

"I-I mean, he looked like he *really* liked you, and I think if you asked him he'd—"

"That's just because he thinks I'm a cloistered princess from some well-to-do family. Tell me, do you think a Druncam hunter would honestly want to fraternize with anyone from the slums, let alone a child?"

"Most of them, no, but Katsuya's not like them!"

Erio was being strangely persistent, and Sheryl started to get concerned. She decided to spell out the reasons it wouldn't work and carefully gauge his reaction. "First off," she began, "let's say he did become one of our backers. What would he have to gain?"

"You managed to work something out with Akira, didn't you?"

"He and I are a couple." She couldn't keep cold fury from seeping into her voice. "You're not suggesting I do the same with Katsuya, are you?"

"N-No, that's not what I meant!" Erio knew that the moment he said yes, it would be all over for him. It didn't matter whether he suggested winning Katsuya over with her body, taking both Akira and Katsuya as her lovers, or breaking it off with Akira and dating Katsuya instead—Sheryl would undoubtedly explode all the same. Merely imagining it caused Erio to break out in a cold sweat, and he felt the strange upsurge of emotion within him finally begin to simmer down. Once he'd regained his calm, he realized just how strange he'd sounded moments ago, and he breathed a sigh. "Right, of course. There's no way something like that would be possible. Sorry for even bringing it up."

"It's fine, as long as you understand now. What even gave you the

idea?”

“Nothing in particular. I just found myself starting to think it’d be nice, is all.”

“Is that so?” Sheryl was unconvinced. Why would such a minor reason like that warrant how adamant he’d been just now? Yet she couldn’t detect any signs from Erio that he was lying or had an ulterior motive. That in itself was bizarre, but she judged that whatever the cause might be, Erio himself probably wasn’t aware of it, and continuing to press him would get her nowhere. So she left him with one final comment to end the matter once and for all. “You *do* know that if Katsuya did become our backer, Aricia would probably dump you, right?”

She made this prediction quite matter-of-factly, and Erio spluttered. “Wh-What?! Why?!”

“Why? It’s obvious. Aricia’s one of our top brass. If Katsuya became a supporter of ours, they’d be seeing a lot of each other. I wouldn’t be surprised at all if she fell for him.”

“N-No, there’s no way she would...” Erio was clearly struggling. “I mean, from just that...”

“He already had two girls with him back there, so I’m sure he’s used to handling women. Not to mention, it seems like he tends to say things that, well, give girls the wrong impression.”

“B-But still—”

“He’s good-looking, strong, and naturally talented. He’s decently wealthy, kind, would protect us as our supporter, and would be a good family man besides. If someone like that accidentally said something misleading to Aricia and she thought for a second it might work out, my guess is it wouldn’t be long before those feelings became serious.”

Erio’s face grew pale. Sheryl observed him carefully.

“Now then, Erio,” she said, “what exactly was it you wanted to discuss? I’m so tired right now I could drop, so if it’s nothing major, let’s save it for another time.”

“A-Ah, right. Sorry. Yeah, I’ll talk to you about it later.” Erio made his way out of the room, his feet unsteady.

Once Sheryl was finally alone, she reflected on what could have caused Erio’s behavior. Her first guess was that, either through a wrong impression

or a mere lack of discretion, Erio had gotten the idea in his head that Katsuya would be a suitable backer for the gang.

But too many details of his behavior had been decidedly unlike him. It should have been obvious to him that Sheryl's words to Katsuya had only been an act, and yet Erio had asked if those were her honest feelings. And it should have also been clear that Katsuya becoming their supporter was out of the question—yet Erio had been doggedly persistent in advocating for him.

"Really, what in the world is going on?"

She wondered for a little while longer, but when she still came up with nothing, she finally let it go. After all, she had a bevy of other things to worry about.

What Sheryl didn't realize was that the reason Erio had asked Sheryl about her feelings had nothing to do with why he'd advocated for Katsuya as a backer. But in Sheryl's mind she'd unwittingly linked them together. So she failed to realize what had actually driven Erio to verify her intentions: her conduct back at the Kugama Building had utterly terrified him.

Chapter 91: The Rising Star of Katsuya's Detractors

Akira was driving through the wasteland to meet up with Shikarabe, at that time of day when the distinction between late night and early morning became unclear.

It was time for the bounty hunt at last.

He'd finally received the long-anticipated call from Shikarabe yesterday, after the sun had already set. He'd gone right to bed afterward but still hadn't gotten enough sleep, and was now desperately fighting to keep his eyelids open as he drove.

In the passenger seat, Alpha looked concerned. *Akira, let me drive, okay? Go ahead and nap while you can. If you're tired while on the hunt, it'll affect your performance.*

"Good point. All right then, you take the wheel. G'night." Akira closed his eyes, gave into his weariness, and was fast asleep in seconds. Alpha had already assumed control of the vehicle and expertly maneuvered the truck along the rough desert ground, minimizing bumps and jolts so as not to wake him. Thanks to her, even in the driver's seat Akira slept surprisingly soundly.

After he'd been out for a while, Alpha finally roused him. *Morning, sleepyhead. Feel better?*

"Well, better than I did, anyway." Akira looked around at his surroundings groggily. The sun had yet to rise.

You ought to eat some breakfast while you have the opportunity. Once you meet up with Shikarabe and the others, you might not have time.

"Good thinking," he mumbled. The truck was packed mostly full of ammunition, but Akira had brought a bit of food along as well. He took out one of his rations—popular with hunters on the go—from the back seat.

Many foodstuffs for relic hunters were appealing precisely because they

differed from your run-of-the-mill rations. They all tasted and felt the same, but once they were consumed, the differences became clear. Some were almost entirely digested by the body, with very little waste to expel—helping to suppress the natural urge to go to the bathroom. Others doubled as medicinal supplements. Still others were designed to be absorbed even if a bullet damaged the stomach and sent partially digested food splattering everywhere inside the body. There were some that had abnormally fast digestion and absorption rates, and others that raised awareness and increased focus. No one living a normal life in the city would have had any need for these effects—these were rations sold solely to help their consumers survive.

Akira had bought a variety of these to test out. The one he'd just selected looked like an unassuming sandwich and cup of coffee—the bread was soft like it should be, and the coffee was properly hot—with the added benefit that he wouldn't need to worry about going to the toilet afterward.

Akira took a bite—and frowned quizzically. "Hmm. It tastes like an actual sandwich. Well, that's pretty impressive in itself, I guess."

If you're dissatisfied with how mundane the flavor is, how about prioritizing taste a bit more when picking your next batch? Nothing like a delicious, hot meal to raise your spirits on the battlefield!

"Good idea. Maybe now that my quality of life's become a bit more stable, it wouldn't hurt to indulge a little more. *Maybe.*"

Akira's comment (which without context could have sounded exceedingly frugal) drew a wry yet amused look from Alpha. *That's rich, coming from a hunter who'll plunk down eighty million aurum on equipment at the drop of a hat and use up medicine that costs two million aurum without any reservations. Don't you think you could afford to spend a* little *more on good food?*

"Hmm, I dunno. I'm pretty satisfied with what I eat now."

A normal meal for Akira these days was actually relatively luxurious compared to what he'd scrounged for in the slums—and just one meal at Stelliana had shown him just how good food could taste. He hadn't realized it, but afterward his palate had become more discerning, and his appetite had gradually increased.

Even so, his choice of food was modest at best, considering his current earnings. And on the whole, Akira was satisfied with that. Of course, he

wasn't immune to the occasional urge to splurge on better-tasting food, but when he considered that this would mean less money in his pocket, his lingering instincts from many years of life on the streets held him back.

Look, if you don't want to, I won't keep pushing. But just keep in mind that there's nothing wrong with a little luxury every now and then. At the very least, there's no need to pinch pennies when it comes to hunter rations.

"Guess you're right. Maybe I should eat a bit more then. I'm still a little hungry, to be honest." Akira grabbed another one.

Alpha looked on, smiling wryly at how just a little treat had improved his mood considerably.

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Akira arrived at the rendezvous, where a number of vehicles were already parked around a larger armored transport. Shikarabe, in the midst of discussing the particulars of the hunt with his comrades, noticed Akira pull up and park nearby.

"Good to see you made it, Akira," the veteran hunter greeted him. "How're you feeling?"

"Just fine."

"Glad to hear it! We'll be heading out immediately once it's time to leave. Go talk to that guy over there and get your gear all situated in the meantime." Shikarabe pointed to the transport. The back hatch was open, and inside Akira could see a hired hunter distributing equipment. "Then once you're ready, you're on standby until we move out, so spend the time however you see fit."

Akira headed as instructed to the distributor, who gave him a brief rundown on what he would use and then issued him a missile launcher for taking down larger monsters (complete with missiles), the list of ingredients for the jamming smoke they'd be using and the data to tune his scanner accordingly, and a communication device along with its code. The boy carried it all back to his own truck. As he looked over the stacks of launcher ammo, he was reminded not only that he'd been hired mainly to provide firepower in this hunt, but that the monsters he was about to go up against were so strong that the hunters would need this kind of artillery to take them down.

There was still some time before the operation would begin in earnest, and some of the non-Druncam hunters Shikarabe had hired had yet to show up. Akira got in his driver's seat, and as he sat there waiting for the call of duty, sleepiness began to take hold of him once more. But he felt bad about taking another nap, so he resisted its embrace by chatting with Alpha instead.

If you're tired, why don't you do some stretching exercises? she suggested. *That'll perk you right up.*

Stretching? Here? This is the wasteland, Alpha.

Oh, it'll be fine. I'll monitor your surroundings for you, so relax. You're about to fight some big game, so you might as well limber up while you can!

Akira found her suggestion a bit odd, but figured if it was on Alpha's recommendation, he ought to give it a try. Even if he suspected there couldn't be a more unsuitable place, he might as well do it if it would improve his mobility in the battle ahead.

He started stretching, and Alpha joined in, positioning herself in front of him and providing examples of how to stretch. She claimed this was so he could properly observe and mimic the positioning and movement of her limbs, but of course that was just a pretext. She'd changed into a swimsuit that left very little to the imagination, and she made wide movements, bent her arms and legs, twisted her hips, stretched her fingertips all the way to her toes, and—in one rather dexterous display—stood on one leg while raising the other high. Stretching exercises weren't typically supposed to be arousing, but the elegant yet refined beauty of her arms and legs, like a sculpted work of art, made the act more seductive than necessary.

But Akira barely even noticed—he was in too much pain. Each time Akira couldn't complete a stretch, Alpha would take over his powered suit and forcibly bend his body to the very limit it could go without damaging him.

Ow! Alpha, that hurts!

Looks like you're a bit stiff. It's important to always be flexible, not just to prevent injury, but to increase the efficacy of your movements. We ought to introduce this into our daily regimen along with fine-tuning your powered suit as you train.

F-Fine, but go easy on me. I'm not— Ow! Wait, that one really hurt!

You'll be fine. Medicine can patch up a few torn muscles and broken bones, no problem.

That certainly doesn't sound fine!

Alpha merely grinned with amusement. Akira continued to grumble and complain, but never told her to stop.

Leading by example, Alpha did the splits next. As her chest pressed against the ground, she wore a comfortable, leisurely smile. In contrast, Akira's expression was one of pain and misery as he tried to copy her form.

Then Shikarabe approached. "What on earth are you doing?"

"You can't tell? Stretches," Akira replied.

"Right." What Shikarabe wanted to ask was *why* Akira was doing it right here and now, of all things, but the boy's response was so matter-of-fact that Shikarabe lost all desire to pursue that line of questioning. However, seeing his face twisted in pain raised another doubt in the older hunter's mind. "Say, Akira. Just out of curiosity, what type of powered suit is that? Sycophant or reading-type?"

"Uh..."

Reading-type, Alpha offered.

"Reading-type," Akira parroted.

Shikarabe's face grew tense. A short silence fell between them. "That so?" he finally said. "Well, I'm sure you'll be fine, but just be careful, okay?"

Unsure what Shikarabe was getting at, Akira asked him, "What do you mean, be careful?"

"I mean, be careful your limbs don't twist and snap off."

Sensing Akira's bewilderment, Shikarabe elaborated further. As long as they had money—a *lot* of money—anyone these days could buy themselves the type of extraordinary body that hunters were only very rarely born with. In fact, that was why powered suits had risen in popularity to become the standard for well-off hunters. Naturally, their high demand had also spurred corporations to compete with each other in the powered suit market, raising the suits' commercial value as well. Businesses with slogans like "Become superhuman—wear our suits!" were common, regardless of how exaggerated that claim actually was.

As a result, many consumers, inundated with the oversaturation of marketing and advertising, bought into the lie—even though, deep down,

they knew better. The more they heard the claim, the more true it seemed, until they ultimately fell prey to the delusion that simply by wearing a powered suit, you really could attain a superhuman level of strength.

Shikarabe knew someone who'd been so deceived. This hunter had been so enamored with the idea of superhuman strength that they'd gone through illegal channels to try and snag a high performance powered suit on the cheap—and ended up with a black-market model that hadn't even made it to mass production. Furthermore, they'd been under the false impression that the suit automatically adjusted and conformed to the user's body immediately upon wearing it, so they'd unwittingly donned it with the previous owner's data still in the system.

"Then one day," Shikarabe recounted, "we went on a relic hunt together. They had no problems with mobility that I could see. Now I realize this was probably because up until that point, they'd only made simple movements like walking, sitting, stuff like that. It was only afterward that it became clear there was a problem." His expression was grave, with a hint of pity.

Akira felt an unpleasant sweat trickle down his cheek. "What happened to them?" he asked, after some hesitation.

"We were on standby. So as a way to both kill time and confirm there were no problems with the motor function on their suit, they started doing some light stretching exercises. And right when they started some more exaggerated movements, their suit caused the joints in their limbs to bend beyond their body's limit, snapping their arms and legs like twigs—just like that. They were in dire straits afterward."

Akira's face went stiff, while Shikarabe looked grim as he recalled the scene.

"Their suit was a reading-type, like yours," he continued. "And I didn't find this out until later, but apparently the previous user had been a cyborg. Cyberized bodies have limits far beyond regular ones to begin with, and since cyborg data was loaded into that suit, it bent their joints way beyond what they could handle. With a sycophant there's no danger of that, since the suit's capabilities can't exceed the limits of the wearer." On the other hand, he explained, a reading-type suit would read data from the neurotransmitters in its user's body, so it could potentially respond faster than the user was naturally capable of. By the time the user experienced pain, it would already be too late.

Akira imagined this scenario in his head and cringed. “Was there not a safety function installed or anything?”

“The previous user had disabled it. That happens more than you’d expect—the default settings end up restricting the movements of cyborgs, so the users have to modify them. Their survival depends on being able to move properly, while a regular person’s bones would break if they tried to move like a cyborg in battle. So safety functions designed for unmodified users only chain cyborgs down.” Shikarabe gave a rueful grin. “And even if the safety function *had* been enabled, the result would’ve been the same, since it would’ve been set to a cyborg’s standards of safety.”

Akira hesitated to ask his next question. “What happened to them then?”

“Well, after swallowing a ton of medicine, they managed to make it. But now they’ve suffered some sort of trauma toward powered suits, so these days they use a combination of physical augmentations and body armor. Not like I don’t understand, though, considering what they went through.”

Akira managed to tear himself away from his anxiousness long enough to look at Alpha. She wore a placid smile. He took that to mean her earlier comment about torn muscles, broken bones, and medicine had only been a joke, and he began to relax. Deciding he was done stretching for now, he stood up to change tack and chase away any unnecessary worries. “So what brings you over here anyway, Shikarabe?” he asked. “You need something? Is it time to move out?”

“Oh, that’s right—I almost forgot. It *is* almost time to head out, but that’s not the reason. I actually had a favor I wanted to ask of you. I’d like you to take this kid along with you in your truck.” He gestured to a boy standing behind him, and the kid stepped out in front of Akira.

The Druncam rookie instinctively gave Akira a searching look, evaluating him, and his face looked doubtful and confused. Nevertheless, he showed at least a modicum of politeness toward the outsider. “I’m Togami. Nice to be working with you.”

Akira was too surprised to respond immediately, but eventually managed, “Akira. Nice to be working with you.” However, his bewilderment was directed not at Togami but at Shikarabe.

“Shikarabe, what gives? I’ll take him along, sure, but you’d better not be suggesting that we fight together on the battlefield, or that I’m supposed to be his babysitter.”

“Relax. I hired you as an auxiliary force, so I wouldn’t have you do anything so bothersome. You don’t need to fight together as a team either. Do whatever each of you sees fit.”

“Then can I toss him out of my truck if he gets on my nerves?” Akira had accepted the job, so he planned to follow Shikarabe’s orders to the best of his ability. But if he had his way, he’d prefer to operate solo, so he honestly wanted to refuse. Therefore, while being careful to stay within the bounds of his orders, he’d suggested something completely outrageous, hoping that Shikarabe would rescind his request.

But the man just grinned. “If you’re going to do that, at least try to aim so that he lands in my vehicle. He’ll be a pain to retrieve otherwise.”

At that, Akira had no choice but to accept. “Fine,” he said after a pause. “I’ll take him.”

“Sorry for the trouble. Be ready to head out when I give the signal. Don’t fall behind, now.” With that, Shikarabe headed back to his post, leaving Togami behind. The rookie, for his part, looked like he was about to explode at being treated like such a nuisance, but neither Shikarabe nor Akira cared one bit.

No sooner had they packed Togami’s share of equipment into Akira’s truck and finished the rest of their preparations than Shikarabe gave the signal to depart, and Akira felt fired up with anticipation.

It’s go time, Akira, Alpha said.

Yeah, Akira replied. *Let’s kill some monsters.* With Togami to his right in the front passenger seat, and Alpha cheering him on at his left as she floated in midair outside the vehicle, Akira was finally ready to begin the bounty hunt.

◆

Akira and the others drove on through the dark desert wastes. The sun had yet to rise. Shikarabe and his comrades took point in their armored transport—the command center for this operation—while the rest of the hunters trailed behind in their vehicles.

Togami had been in a foul mood even before they’d set off, and the farther they drove, the worse his mood became. No matter how often he glanced at Akira from the passenger’s seat, he saw nothing but a weakling.

As his irritation and dissatisfaction mounted, so did his unconscious contempt, until he could stand it no longer.

"Hey, hotshot!" he demanded spitefully. "What was all that crap you were spouting earlier about how you weren't gonna play babysitter? What'd you mean by that?"

"What do *you* mean?" Akira retorted. "I meant what I said."

"Don't be stupid! It's obvious that you'll be holding *me* back. Toss me out of the vehicle, you said? Don't make me laugh! I'll be chucking *you* out if you don't meet my standards, so don't drag me down if you know what's good for you."

"Sure, whatever."

Akira's dismissive reply, which Togami took as a show of arrogance, only upset the Druncam boy further. *Shikarabe, you bastard! What're you trying to pull, dumping me on this brat?*

Togami had gotten into Akira's truck because Shikarabe told him to. But the veteran hunter hadn't given him a reason—merely told him to shut up and get in, in a tone that brooked absolutely no argument.

Shikarabe's condescending attitude had also ticked off Togami a bit, but as Shikarabe surpassed him in experience, ability, equipment, and hunter rank, the boy had realized there was no choice but to submit. Togami might've been confident in his own ability, but he knew he was still a greenhorn and could recognize when he was outclassed.

But that didn't keep him from asking questions. Why had Shikarabe put him together with Akira? In his own mind, Togami placed himself on a pedestal, so he'd assumed there had to be some significant reason behind the decision.

But his new partner didn't look skilled at all. In fact, he seemed to embody the stereotype of a novice that had nothing going for him but his equipment—in other words, precisely the type of hunter that gave Druncam rookies like Togami a bad rap.

Is Shikarabe looking down on me? Does he think I'm on this guy's level? That's bull! Don't lump me in with him! Togami was convinced he was superior and decided to prove it.

"Hey, what's your hunter rank, anyway? Out with it," he spat.

"21."

Togami's face twisted into a grin—partly out of scorn, partly from

supreme confidence in his own skill. “21?! Ha! You’re only rank 21 and you have the gall to look down on me? I’m rank 27!”

Since Druncam rookies could just borrow all their equipment from the syndicate, they usually focused on raising their hunter ranks instead of their pay (inadvertently playing right into the desk jockeys’ hands). As a result, many of Druncam’s young hunters tended to overvalue the importance of hunter rank in the real world.

Togami was no exception. So when he heard Akira’s rank, he subconsciously placed himself above Akira and declared as much. But Akira’s only response was to glance briefly in his direction before nonchalantly returning his gaze to the road, and Togami’s anger flared up.

“Hey! You hear what I said, brat?!” he shouted, but no matter how many times he repeated himself, Akira ignored him completely. Togami clicked his tongue in irritation and turned a sour face toward the wasteland outside.

After a while, he grinned to himself. If he was going to be treated like he didn’t exist, then he’d just have to show this snot-nosed punk who was superior out on the field.

Outside, Alpha floated beside Akira in a sitting position, watching him with an amused smile as he continued to pretend Togami didn’t exist. *You think it’s okay to ignore him like that?* she asked.

For now. If he starts to be anything other than a loudmouth, though, I’m flinging him back at Shikarabe, Akira replied matter-of-factly.

◆

Shikarabe, Yamanobe, and Parga were riding in the armored transport ahead of Akira and the rest of the unit. The vehicle was spacious enough for ten fully kitted-out hunters to ride comfortably; until recently, though, the rest of the space had held gear and equipment for the hunt. But now most of this had already been distributed to Akira and the other non-Druncam people, so there was plenty of room.

In other words, Togami had been exiled for reasons entirely unrelated to space.

Yamanobe found it odd that the boy hadn’t come with them. “Shikarabe, if you were just going to shun Togami from the start, then why’d you even

bring him along? It's not like you're a fan of rookies to begin with, are ya?"

Shikarabe was checking the location data on the monsters that the recon team had sent over. "That's true. But I do prefer the Group B rookies to Group A—by a lot. Group A gets fawned over by the desk jockeys, who hand them all their gear and jobs on a silver platter. At least Group B makes an effort to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps."

"Yet they're still enough of an eyesore that you don't want them riding in the same vehicle as you?"

"Wrong, actually. I brought Togami along as part of a deal with some folks who want Group B to star in this hunt. And I put him with Akira to make that happen."

Druncam veterans generally despised the rookies, since the desk jockeys heavily favored them and even made managerial decisions that favored the youngsters. But Group B rookies were mostly hunters who'd had it rough, like those from the slums, and yet had still managed to pass the syndicate's entrance exam on their own merits. So a fair number of veterans had a soft spot for them.

Shikarabe had made a deal with some of these veterans. If the more skilled hunters from Group B took part in the hunt, Group B could take credit for its success. The goal for these veterans was to create a band of rookies skilled enough to stand up to Group A. With the Group A rookies' recent failure at Yonozuka, the desk jockeys' influence had already been shaken. If all went well, Group B could potentially come to rival Group A in both raw strength and influence.

Of course, this placed Shikarabe squarely in the war between factions that he detested so much, but he detested the Group A rookies and the desk jockeys even more. So he'd agreed to allow Togami to join, and in return the Group B backers had provided the necessary funds for the bounty hunt.

Parga listened to Shikarabe's explanation with interest. "Heh. So that Togami kid was chosen as the one to receive all the glory. Then tell me this, Shikarabe: How strong is he? He just looks like some brat that acts too big for his britches, if you ask me."

"No idea. The Group B backers chose him, though, so I'm assuming he at least has enough talent to fill those britches."

"Hrm. So he's the rising star of Group B, then—or more like the rising star of Katsuya's detractors," Parga mused.

“Group A” and “Group B” were just labels to distinguish between the rookies, but Katsuya had supporters all over Druncam—the Group A rookies themselves, the desk jockeys like Mizuha who backed them, and anyone who supported Group A thinking they were Druncam’s hope for the future, to name a few. And because his supporters weren’t limited to the rookies, they had grown into a formidable force, a force that the syndicate as a whole could no longer ignore. Any mention of Katsuya now made Shikarabe scowl with contempt.

Parga laughed when he saw Shikarabe’s expression. “You really do hate that kid, huh?”

“With a passion,” Shikarabe replied without hesitating.

Yamanobe grinned wryly. Then the vehicle’s scanner picked something up, and his grin grew wider. “Well, maybe this’ll make you feel better—looks like we have an opportunity to see what our rising star can really do.”

Parga contacted Togami over the wireless. “No. 8, monsters dead ahead. Take the lead and wipe ’em out!”

“Roger wilco! I’ll be done in no time!”

At hearing his enthusiasm, Yamanobe and Parga grinned in anticipation. Shikarabe, however, just sighed.

◆

Togami saw Parga’s order as a prime opportunity to show Akira his true strength.

“Roger wilco! I’ll be done in no time!” he announced, a daring grin on his face, then turned to face Akira. “Hey, you!” he barked. “There’s a monster up ahead, so take me there. Get a move on!”

Akira floored it without a word. If they wanted to pass the armored transport, they needed speed. But the truck bounced and jerked over the bumpy wasteland terrain. Togami nearly flew out the window.

As he struggled to regain his balance, he shouted at Akira, “Hey, what gives?! Don’t you know you need to drive more carefully?! Pay more attention!”

But once again, Akira only stole a single glance at Togami and returned his gaze to the road. Technically, he’d done as asked—Togami had told him to get a move on, and he had. But because he was used to Alpha’s support,

he'd forgotten that others couldn't rely on it.

Togami, however, took it as a personal attack. "You *bastard*."

Akira ignored Togami's piercing glare, but he did let up on the gas a bit.

Once they'd passed the command vehicle and taken the lead, a group of carnivorous monsters came into view, with a gigantic car-sized beast at their head. When the pack caught sight of Akira's truck, they let out ferocious roars and charged at their prey as one.

As they rapidly closed with the monsters, Akira kept his eyes fixed straight ahead. "So, how close do you want me to get?" he asked Togami without so much as a glance in his direction.

"Just stop here!" Togami spat.

Without even replying, Akira slowly brought the truck to a stop. Togami got out, his rifle in tow, before turning around and flashing Akira a condescending, scornful grin. He was clearly confident in his superiority.

"Shikarabe ordered *me* to take care of it—he knows I can handle it on my own. You just stay put and watch. I'll show you the difference in skill between you and me!"

Togami was under the impression that the only hunters with any real strength on this expedition were Druncam ones like himself—and in fact, he was mostly correct. The lion's share of the auxiliary forces that Shikarabe and his comrades had rounded up were failed hunters in deep debt. They certainly couldn't hold a candle to Shikarabe and the other veterans—their skills were far below even Togami's.

When they'd asked him to join the hunt, Togami had assumed the veterans were finally acknowledging his skill. He wasn't technically wrong—but he was unaware of the veterans' ulterior motive.

So Togami was all fired up. This was his moment to show everyone—Shikarabe and the other veterans, the less skilled hunters they'd hired, and Akira—how strong he really was.

First, he surveyed the area, locating the perfect sniping spot in no time. Hefting an enormous rifle that he'd been issued specifically for this hunt, he got into position, aimed at the leader of the monsters, and pulled the trigger. The recoil of the shot jerked Togami's body back as the bullet sailed through the air and pierced the target's torso, blasting a huge hole in the monster's body and sending fresh blood and guts flying.

The damage was far too severe to be called a wound.

Yet the monster didn't fall—on the contrary, it charged at Togami even more furiously. But Togami was calm and relaxed. He observed the monster through the rifle's scope, and with a smug grin pulled the trigger again. There was a slight delay before the bullet erupted from the rifle and mercilessly tore into the creature, notwithstanding the beast's unbelievable tenacity. Its eight massive legs were reduced to five in an instant, and the hole in its torso grew even larger, slowing its relentless charge at last.

Togami fired a final bullet into its head, and it moved no more.

While Togami had been preoccupied with the leader, the rest of the swarm had continued its charge. They'd nearly reached him now—but he wasn't worried. Switching weapons, he fired into the pack of monsters. Each bullet was designed to accurately pick off targets moving at high speeds—and they pierced flesh, shattered bones, and flung blood everywhere.

Following the pack leader, these medium-sized monsters had managed to survive in the wasteland up until now, meaning they possessed considerable strength. Outside of striking a weak spot, each of Togami's bullets didn't do much damage individually. But if those bullets peppered an entire body, it was a different story. And since the gun was loaded with an extended magazine, there was no danger of the ammo running out as Togami ripped through the monsters, one by one.

By the time he'd taken care of those ahead of him, some smaller beasts had circled around him, avoiding his fire and getting close enough to pounce. The surviving monsters were more fueled by anger than appetite as they lunged at their enemy.

But Togami was ready. He not only avoided their attacks with ease, but countered with a suit-enhanced kick to one of the small creatures. It flew through the air and crumpled to the ground, instantly reduced to a mere lump of flesh and shattered bone. Several other monsters tried their luck with him and met the same fate.

When none were left standing, Togami pelted their motionless corpses with gunfire to make sure they were dead.

Faced with a pack like that, your average novice hunter would have had their hands full just trying to escape—but true to his word, Togami had taken them all down on his own.

“That’s all? Piece of cake.” Satisfied that his display had been sufficiently impressive, Togami returned to where the truck was parked, imagining the look Akira would have on his face.

But to his surprise, Akira still sat in the driver’s seat, eyes straight ahead and actually looking somewhat bored, even as Shikarabe’s vehicle caught up and passed them by.

Togami’s shock gave way to confusion. *Did he not see any of that? No, he had to have. He was looking right at me as I was heading back.* Unable to hide his displeasure, he growled at Akira, “Hey, don’t you have anything to say to me?”

“Hurry and get in the truck, or I’ll leave you behind.”

Togami’s mood instantly soured. Surely his fighting back there had warranted at least *some* kind of reaction. If Akira had praised him, Togami would’ve accepted it—and if he’d criticized him, the Druncam boy would’ve just chalked it up to the ramblings of a sore loser. Either way, Togami was supremely confident that he’d shown what he was truly capable of. Yet Akira had hardly reacted at all.

Almost as if nothing Togami had done had impressed him in the least.

Togami was about to raise his voice in fury when Parga’s voice came from the communicator. “No. 8, No. 9—you’re falling behind! What do you think you’re doing? Don’t tell me your truck broke down or something.”

Akira sighed. “This is No. 9. The vehicle’s fine. For some reason, No. 8’s refusing to get in. Should I just drive off without him?”

“Is No. 8 where he can hear? No. 8, what’s going on? Something wrong? You get hurt and can’t move?”

“N-No, nothing like that—”

“Then get in the vehicle, you idiot!” Parga yelled, and the transmission cut out.

Shaking with rage, Togami ground his teeth as he tried to suppress his inner fury and clambered back into the truck. The moment he was in, Akira drove off. Neither of them spoke to each other after that.

◆

Meanwhile, Shikarabe and his comrades were sharing their thoughts on Togami’s fight, which they’d viewed through the monitor in the transport.

Parga, for one, was impressed. “Not bad, not bad. Especially considering his young age and the gear he’s using, I’d say he deserves a passing grade.”

Yamanobe, on the other hand, was less so. “Really? The fact that he rushed in there on his own because he thought he’d be able to handle it, even though he’s on a team, makes me question his judgment.”

“Well, I’d say that’s ’cause I specifically gave *him* the order,” Parga rejoined.

“Even so, he could’ve used that as a reason to appoint himself leader and delegate Akira to a supporting role. While he did have the strength to handle it on his own, that’s not competency—that’s recklessness. This is the wasteland, and taking unnecessary risks will only get you killed.”

“Wow, harsh! What do you think, Shikarabe?”

Shikarabe replied offhandedly, “It’s too soon to tell. But if I had to evaluate him based on that performance alone, I’d say that anyone who gets a big head after defeating monsters of that caliber is just gonna be dead weight in the end.”

Parga and Yamanobe laughed as one.

“You don’t pull any punches either, huh, Shikarabe?” Parga said. “I thought he was supposed to be the rising star of the Katsuya haters, right? Since you hate Katsuya too, don’t you think you ought to raise your opinion of Togami a little?”

“I’m not gonna let my personal feelings influence my evaluation. I’ll wait to see how he fares against the bounty monsters. Then I’ll give my assessment.”

Yamanobe looked surprised. “You’re gonna send him out on the front lines? What about the deal with those veterans? He can’t make the Group B rookies look good if he dies, you know. What are you gonna do then?”

“I’ll think about that when the time comes, but I can tell you that anyone who dies that easily wouldn’t be able to carry Group B anyway. And there was nothing in the agreement saying he has to survive in the first place,” Shikarabe added harshly.

Yamanobe and Parga grinned. They knew he was right.

Chapter 92: The Hundred-Million-Aurum Hunters

Dawn was about to break, and Akira and the others were still en route to where the bounty monsters lay in wait.

Akira and Togami still weren't speaking to each other—though while it seemed on the surface like Akira was silent, he was actually passing the time chatting with Alpha by telepathy. Togami, for his part, was giving Akira the silent treatment. Neither of them had any desire to talk to the other—that was the one thing they agreed on.

The sun finally rose, and daybreak began to illuminate the wasteland. Akira reflexively turned his gaze toward the morning sun, and there, in his vision, he saw Alpha against the backdrop of the sky, floating alongside the truck. It was now that brief span of time between late night and early morning—depending on where the sun hit, some areas had welcomed the morning, and others were still clothed in night. In essence, it was a brief moment in time when morning and night coexisted.

Seeing Alpha bathed in the sun's glow in the middle of that scene, her hair and skin giving off an ethereal shine, Akira couldn't help but smile.

Akira, it's morning.

Yeah. For someone who was witnessing such a captivating scene, his reply was decidedly lacking in enthusiasm.

Alpha gave him a teasing grin. *A dull response, as always. Can't you say something a bit more profound?*

Profound? Like what? In actuality, he was awed by the scene before him. But he wasn't good enough with words to do justice to the feeling rising up from within him. Even so, he decided to be honest with her. *Well, it certainly makes more of an impression than the sunrise I saw back in the slums, at least*, he said, and left it at that.

But the truth was, the Akira of the slums would have never been able to even say that much. He hadn't even had a proper place to view the sunrise.

When living in the back alleys of the slums, he'd had to be careful about where he laid his head down at night, lest he get killed in his sleep. The rays of the morning sun hadn't extended to those alleys.

Nor had he had the security to enjoy watching the sunrise. His survival had required that he be constantly on guard and pay attention to what lurked around every dark corner, or what lay at the end of each dim corridor—in other words, places where someone could have jumped him. Letting his guard down to take in the sunrise hadn't been an option.

And even now, here in the wasteland, there were bigger things to worry about.

Alpha pointed to the horizon before them. *Akira, there's a monster straight ahead. It's a bit far from here, but it's already noticed us and is heading this way.*

Akira hesitated a moment before responding. *Understood.* For some reason unknown even to him, he found he was perturbed. He moved to the back of the truck where his CWH anti-materiel rifle was stored, removed it from its emplacement, and with a sour face held it at the ready.

In his Alpha-augmented vision, the source of his irritation was clearly visible—a giant creature charging toward him at a speed that completely belied its massive girth. The size of its torso alone was double that of the transport Shikarabe and his comrades were riding in, and its entire body was covered in scales resembling armor. At first glance, it looked like a cross between a shark and a crocodile—apart from the crowd of multijointed legs the size of tree trunks that sprouted from its underside.

The twenty or so eyes on its head, spread out in a fan formation, all had Akira's truck in its sights. Despite the uneven terrain, the monster seemed to race along it with no difficulty whatsoever. At each footfall, Akira felt like the earth itself was trembling.

Annoyed, he looked deadly serious as he pulled the rifle's trigger. With a roar, the bullet sailed through the air and instantaneously found its faraway mark. Nor did it just hit the target—with pinpoint precision, it struck a tiny weak point where it could enter. The CWH's proprietary ammo bored into the armored creature and exploded with destructive power rivaling that of a standard tank, pulverizing the flesh from the inside.

The beast's skin was tough, and the shot hadn't been able to pierce all the way through—but that hardly mattered with this type of round. While

the monster's hard exterior kept its body from collapsing inward, the shock wave ruptured its insides, killing it instantly. The massive creature tumbled over and over itself before skidding to a stop on the ground.

A beat later, Parga's orders came over the comms. "No. 9, there's a monster at three o'clock headed right toward you. Judging by its speed, it'll catch up if you try to outrun it. You and No. 8 take care of it if you can. If it's too much for you, we'll handle it. First, confirm the monster's location."

"This is No. 9. It's already done," Akira replied.

"Oh? Do you think you can take it?"

"No, I mean I've already taken care of it. It's dead."

There was a brief pause. "Huh?" Parga finally breathed, surprised. Another silence settled as Parga checked the status of the monster via the transport's scanner. Finally, he spoke again. "R-Right, we've confirmed that on our end as well. Keep up the good work, and don't fall behind."

"No. 9, roger," Akira replied, and returned to the driver's seat. The monster had been defeated, but his sour mood still remained. Then he noticed Alpha looking at him, smiling as though she found his behavior amusing. He grew embarrassed and tried to hide it by acting cold toward her. *What?*

Nothing at all. Just thinking that you must've enjoyed that sunrise a lot if you're upset at something getting in the way.

Yeah, I guess. The sun had already risen by the time the battle was over. The view of the sunrise had been impressive—but that wasn't all he'd enjoyed looking at. But he already knew that Alpha was well aware of that fact, so he only replied vaguely, not wanting to be teased any further.

Humans became used to their surroundings eventually. But for now, the magnificence of Alpha's beautiful form against the morning sun was still a fresh sight for Akira.

Meanwhile, in the passenger's seat, Togami sat frozen in shock, his jaw practically on the floor.

◆

Parga was surprised that Akira had already taken care of the beast even before he gave the order. That monster hadn't been small by any means—in fact, Parga and his companions had been prepared to jump in if it proved

too dicey for the two boys. Now Parga's interest in Akira was immediately piqued.

"Shikarabe, where the *hell* did you find this guy?"

"I met him when we were on a mission together in the Kuzusuhara underground ruins."

"Ah, that hive of Yarata scorpions? There was a big cleanup mission to exterminate them all, right? So you saw him in action and recruited him."

"Not quite," corrected Shikarabe. "The only time we were together was on scouting duty, and he wasn't remarkable even then. But he wasn't dead weight either."

Parga looked puzzled. "Then why'd you invite him? Was it that intuition of yours or whatever? I know you're always saying that a hunter without a sharp intuition isn't gonna last long."

Shikarabe chuckled. "I won't deny that was a factor, but I wouldn't make a decision that affects all of us just on intuition alone. Some other information about him later came to light." He tapped at his terminal and sent the data in question over to Parga and Yamanobe.

After inspecting the contents of the file, Yamanobe looked confused. "This is just a copy of Akira's profile page from the Hunter Office. After the scuffle at the bar, I got interested in the guy and took a look myself, but there wasn't anything impressive on it. Why send *this* to us?"

Parga nodded in agreement. He'd also taken a peek at Akira's profile page out of curiosity, but nearly all of Akira's battle records were unlisted, and the ones that were visible weren't impressive in the least, like how he'd dropped out of the mission in the underground ruins due to injury. Nothing exciting or noteworthy was recorded, so both of them had figured that Shikarabe had hired the boy based on intuition.

"Come on, guys," urged Shikarabe. "This is a copy, so it should be obvious I bought this version from an information broker. There's classified information here you don't see on the official one. Look at the underground ruins section."

Parga did as he was told and chuckled in amusement. "The contents are completely different. 'Request from Kugamayama City management pertaining to matters outside city limits.' The details are..." He looked up. "Classified?!"

Yamanobe seemed just as intrigued. "In other words, the broker got this

copy from an employee who didn't have access to all the info. We can only see the location of the job and the basic overview of the request."

"Right," Shikarabe confirmed. "But that's not all. You can also see the amount he was offered for its completion. Take a look."

The other men read the reward amount listed, and their faces transformed. Parga was so surprised he couldn't help but blurt the number out. "One hundred sixty *million* aurum?! That kid's a hundred-million-aurum hunter?!"

"Hundred-million-aurum" hunters were those who accepted jobs with payouts over that amount. This showed other hunters that you had the skill to earn that much and served as a nice feather in your cap. After all, it wasn't a level your run-of-the-mill hunter was able to reach, and when you joined that exclusive club, people started to treat you with much more respect.

Yamanobe and Parga immediately saw Akira in a new light. Parga nodded as though it all made sense. "No wonder he's so strong. Oh, I get it now—that's why you put him together with Togami, then?"

If the hunters succeeded in defeating the bounty monsters, their names would be recorded on the Hunter Office's bounty list. But in this case, the only ones listed would be the four hunters from Druncam. Akira and the other non-Druncam hunters wouldn't be recognized—officially, they weren't participants.

Succeeding in taking down a bounty monster would undoubtedly gain a hunter notoriety, but ganging up on a monster with a hundred Druncam veterans was significantly less impressive—rather, it would dilute the value of the achievement so much it would barely mean anything at all. Therefore, they needed to defeat the monsters with as few participants as they could. So Shikarabe and his comrades had decided to officially register only the four of them in this hunt (originally just the three of them, then later Togami also as part of Shikarabe's deal).

In short, if they wanted it to look like the four of them had taken down the monsters on their own, the additional hunters would have to participate unofficially. So the veterans had hired Akira and the other non-Druncam hunters without registering the job with the Hunter Office. Given all this, Parga had deduced that Shikarabe had put Akira together with Togami to make Togami and Akira's achievements appear one and the same.

After all, if they let Togami participate in the bounty hunt but he turned out to be full of hot air, it would be obvious to everyone around that he was a hindrance. Keeping the debtor hunters quiet would only go so far, and from the start it wasn't like the details of the job were entirely classified. With just a bit of investigation, anyone could find out the truth.

But if they put Togami with Akira, a hundred-million-aurum hunter despite being around the same age, it would be hard for outsiders to determine which of them was the star and which was dead weight. Neither Akira nor Togami were celebrities—just from looking at the official data, it would be natural for someone to assume that the one with the higher hunter rank had done the most work. And officially, Akira wasn't even part of the hunt, so if someone saw his information, there was a high chance they'd lump him in with the other non-Druncam participants. True, it was nothing one couldn't figure out if they investigated thoroughly enough. Yet Shikarabe knew that there were very few who would, and figured most of those would end up with the wrong idea anyway.

Parga grinned smugly, proud of himself for figuring all this out.

Shikarabe also grinned. "You got it. So don't go spreading it around, okay?"

"Sure, sure," Parga nodded.

Yamanobe, on the other hand, though satisfied by the explanation for the most part, felt concerned on one point. "Going by this local data, though, the Hunter Office didn't just classify his battle records—they outright modified them for the public copy. For them to go that far, the city must've struck some sort of deal with Akira. What the hell could've happened?"

"No idea," Shikarabe replied. "But there's no doubt this reward amount is genuine. This is an internal document, after all. There'd be no need to modify a document already meant for internal eyes, so even if the job itself wasn't made public, it had to be something significant enough to warrant such a huge payout. That's enough to convince me that kid's truly strong."

"I suppose, yeah." Yamanobe honestly would've liked to look into the details of the job more, but he didn't want to draw unwanted attention to himself by poking around in the city's classified data. "But Shikarabe, if he's a hundred-million-aurum hunter, then that would mean he's basically on our level. What if we can't pay him back? If he ends up killing you, that's on you, buddy," he joked.

Shikarabe grinned again. “No problem. Just taking down one of those monsters will keep us plenty in the black. That’s why if Akira wants to get paid, he’d better put in the work, right?”

“Right,” Yamanobe agreed. Hunters risked their lives on a daily basis. While the degree of risk differed depending on the situation, going out into the wasteland generally meant putting your life on the line. Whether you were hunting relics in the ruins or taking down gargantuan bounty monsters, it was always a gamble. If you won, you got the glory—if you lost, an early grave.

Even so, that wasn’t a problem as long as you won—such was the mindset hunters tended to have. Shikarabe and his comrades were no exception as they continued to laugh and joke around.

But there was actually another reason Shikarabe had invited Akira on the hunt, one which he hadn’t told Yamanobe and Parga—and for which he’d shelled out a considerable amount of money to get his hands on classified information from a broker.

Shikarabe had seen Akira in action back in the underground ruins, and he doubted that Akira really did drop out of the job halfway due to an injury. That went against what his intuition was telling him, and he trusted his intuition.

Was Akira just another rookie hunter, or were there some hidden circumstances at play? Because Shikarabe was unable to gauge Akira’s true skill, he had felt torn between the two possibilities and had decided to investigate on his own. Now he’d discovered that something had indeed happened, but he was unable to learn exactly what. He suspected it had something to do with the relic theft incident that was going on around the same time, but this was merely speculation on his part.

So he wanted to get another look at Akira in action and determine his real strength. He would have his trusted comrades observe Akira in battle and gauge their reactions, while he would get to form his own objective assessment. Then he could see if his intuition really had been on the money.

And that was why Shikarabe had become a rather proactive participant in a war between factions that he would normally have had no interest in.

◆

Togami sat in the passenger's seat, staring at the wasteland passing by outside the window. He took a furtive glance at Akira, his expression rigid. Akira displayed no reaction—he'd clearly noticed Togami's gaze, but was ignoring him.

Even after Akira had defeated the behemoth on his own, they hadn't spoken a word to each other. But *something* had changed. Togami now showed no sign of his earlier dissatisfaction. Instead, he seemed doubtful and wary, as if toward an unknown threat, and his anxiety and restlessness clearly showed.

Akira's skills had shaken him.

Not only had the non-Druncam boy immediately noticed a monster from that far away, he'd hit his mark from a moving vehicle and destroyed it in one shot. If someone had asked Togami to do the same, he would immediately have sworn it was impossible.

Had Shikarabe or his comrades pulled it off instead, he might have been surprised at their skill, but that would be all. This was different—someone he'd already looked down on had achieved such an outstanding feat.

Togami was shocked—even bewildered. In his confusion, he desperately cast about for some kind of logical explanation. Without realizing he was doing so, he glanced at Akira over and over as he continued to speculate.

Then everything suddenly came into focus and made sense.

His face twisted in displeasure. He clearly didn't want to acknowledge what had occurred to him.

But if the novice in the driver's seat next to him—with a lower hunter rank, a wimpy appearance, and better equipment than Druncam rookies were known to have—displayed a higher level of skill than he had, it could mean only one thing: he was even more of a novice.

No! That can't be true! he thought immediately. He chided himself for his self-doubt and regained his composure. But the doubting didn't stop. *I'm strong, I* know *I am! I was especially selected to join this hunt because I* am *that good!*

Togami's confidence had a solid grounding in reality. Among the rookies, his hunter rank was the second highest, with only Katsuya above him. There was a reason that Katsuya's detractors had placed their bets on him. Put nicely, he had enough strength to take pride in—put not so nicely, he was skilled enough to get carried away by his own ego.

His confidence suggested to him another logical possibility. Putting on a bold front, he scowled at Akira, deciding he would put him in his place. “Hey, don’t get on your high horse just ’cause you managed a fluke like that. I know there’s no way you did that with your own skill,” he scoffed.

Akira turned toward Togami. There was nothing in his gaze to suggest any kind of emotion, yet Togami felt nervous all the same, and drew back a bit.

After a short silence, Akira said, “You’re right. I doubt I could’ve done it on my own.” Then he fell silent again and looked back toward the road.

Togami was stunned. Then a rigid smile appeared on his lips. He laughed nervously. *H-Ha ha! I knew it—that was just a fluke! He was only bluffing! But of course—there’s no way a mere rank 21 could pull that off!*

But despite his youth, Togami was strong and talented—he’d been proactive in his exploits across the wasteland, gained a wealth of experience, and improved his own hunter intuition.

And all of that experience and intuition was telling him that Akira’s feat hadn’t been a mere fluke. The smile on Togami’s lips remained strained.

Alpha looked at Akira with a curious expression. *Akira, was it really okay to say that?*

Hm? It’s the truth, though. That wasn’t a fluke or anything, but it wasn’t my real ability either. It was only thanks to your support that I could make that shot.

That’s true, but remember what Elena told you earlier? That if you’re too humble and undervalue yourself, some people might take it as a personal attack?

Akira grimaced when he heard that, but then thought about it from another angle. *Then let’s just say it was a personal attack.*

Seriously?

His expression relaxed. *I don’t have any obligation to act friendly toward someone who’s gonna take issue with every little thing I do.*

But Alpha was quick to correct him. *I’m pretty sure the reason he’s mad is that when you first met, you said you were going to toss him from your vehicle.*

Akira didn’t know what to say to that.

It’s good to see that your ability to instigate conflict is just as keen as

ever, Alpha added, looking amused, *but I think it's about time for you to let off the gas a little*.

Akira sat silent for a while, then muttered, *I'm sorry.*

His character was still twisted in many respects, but little by little, he'd at least straightened out enough to where he now felt like he needed to apologize for his actions.

◆

Near the corpse of the large monster Akira had defeated, a tarantula-like monster was poking around. Almost one meter tall, it was mechanically augmented like a cyborg, and the eyes on its head could zoom in like cameras. From a distance, the creature had watched Akira snipe the behemoth, and it could tell without a doubt which of the two was the bigger threat.

Chapter 93: Tankrantula

Akira and Togami remained stonily silent as they continued their drive through the wasteland. Akira didn't even have Togami on his mental radar, and while Togami had calmed down, he still occasionally cast suspicious glances at Akira. They also encountered no more monsters, so the time passed peacefully.

But at last Shikarabe's voice came over the comms, shattering the tranquility.

"We're about to reach a bounty monster's habitat. This one's called a tankrantula, worth eight hundred million aurum. That ought to fire you all up!"

Akira and Togami immediately switched to a combat mindset. Togami, in particular, was raring to go.

Shikarabe laid out their plan. They were to spread out before making contact with the monster and effectively surround the target. Each team's starting position was displayed on the screens of the communicators they'd been issued.

Yamanobe and Parga would take point, and everyone else would serve as decoys, drawing the enemy's fire away from these two. Once the pair had finished their initial task, everyone would launch an all-out attack with the missile launchers, so Shikarabe instructed everyone to avoid using them until he gave the order. It was a simple plan—maybe a bit too simple, in fact.

"That about covers it. Anyone got any questions?"

Togami responded, bewilderment on his face. "No. 8 here. Don't you think that plan's awfully basic? You're not going to tell us what routes to proceed by or to set up formations, or how to effectively time our attacks?"

"I'm giving each team full authority to act on their own discretion, except to retreat."

"Full authority? So you mean we're allowed to do whatever we want?"

"I mean you decide as a team on the best course of action. We'll give

you orders only if we deem it necessary."

"That's way too irresponsible! Aren't you guys supposed to be the commanders of this unit?"

In a sense, Togami had a point. Under Shikarabe's current tactics, the additional, non-Druncam hunters would hardly out-perform an untrained mob. That more or less defeated the purpose of acting as a unit in the first place.

But Shikarabe was fully aware of this. Many of the non-Druncam hunters were here because they shouldered a lot of debt and had been more or less coerced into it, not because they actually had any talent. In his judgment, asking them to cooperate in an efficient and precise manner in the first place was too much.

Togami couldn't figure this out—even though the desk jockeys of Druncam had given him and the rest of Group B the cold shoulder, he'd still received proper team battle training as one of Druncam's rookie hunters. And he had mistakenly assumed that the non-Druncam hunters would be on the same level.

So even though Shikarabe and Togami were both Druncam hunters, their levels of understanding were worlds apart, and the boy was therefore prone to make erroneous judgment calls. In fact, this very discrepancy was the primary reason the veterans and the rookies were often at each other's throats.

Shikarabe had neither the time nor the patience to argue with him, and spoke harshly. "Can't you move without being told every little thing to do? Then just sit there and do nothing. As long as you don't get in our way, I don't care. Anything else?"

No other questions were raised. Akira naturally had no objection to being able to choose his own actions, and the hunters in debt had long lost the will to be choosy. As long as they got the reward they were promised, nothing else mattered to them.

"Then I'm out. If you want your reward, you better work for it." The transmission cut off. Akira had been promised a higher pay based on his efforts, so he was champing at the bit, eager to raise his reward as much as possible.

Meanwhile, Togami continued to glare at the comm device.

◆

From inside the armored transport, Shikarabe yelled out to Yamanobe and Parga. “You two ready to roll?”

His comrades both sat astride desert bikes that had been packed away in the transport. They grinned eagerly, prepared for battle.

“Yep, ready anytime.”

“Me too!”

Yamanobe’s bike had a massive gun that looked like a cross between a recoilless rifle and a sniper rifle. Parga’s was equipped with an automatic grenade launcher. Each weapon was hooked up to an autoloading ammo bin on the bike, so they wouldn’t have to worry about reloading their guns manually.

Seeing the two of them were fully prepared, Shikarabe grinned back and nodded. “All right. What’re you thinking, then—are you going to head out right now? There’s no guarantee that any of the other hunters will diligently fulfill their role as decoys, so it might be best to wait. I’ll be your decoy if necessary, but if you’re gonna hang out in the vehicle for a while longer, I won’t have to.”

Yamanobe shook his head. “Nah, don’t worry. We’d rather not risk falling victim to some surprise ambush and damaging our bikes. We’ll head out as soon as we’ve confirmed the monster’s location for ourselves. This transport’s armor is pretty sturdy, right?”

“Yeah. It can survive a barrage of concentrated fire for a little while, at least. But if it seems like it’s about to give out, we retreat. Don’t bite off more than *you* can chew either, you two.”

Parga laughed, in good spirits. “Yeah, yeah, don’t worry! Any hunter worth their salt knows to pick their battles. I’m not gonna kick the bucket ’cause I got a little greedy.”

Hunters were constantly balancing risk against reward to determine the correct course of action. When a hunter’s greed made the reward seem more enticing and they ended up underestimating the risk, the wasteland swallowed them up.

Neither Shikarabe nor his comrades had any intention of dying today—or any other day, for that matter.

Just then, the vehicle’s scanner went wild. Shikarabe immediately

checked the source and gave a bold grin. Then he sent a spirited announcement through the comms: “Tankrantula has been spotted! Prepare for battle!”

With that order, the battle against a monster worth eight hundred million aurum began.

Akira spotted the tankrantula even before Shikarabe and his comrades did. When Shikarabe had given the order for everyone to spread out, Akira had checked his communicator to confirm the position he and Togami had been assigned. They’d been sent a good distance ahead of everyone else, and from there Alpha was the first to detect the bounty monster’s presence.

Akira, there’s your target. She pointed across the wasteland ahead of him, and Akira’s gaze followed. At that distance, the tankrantula appeared as a mere speck to the naked eye, but in his Alpha-augmented vision, it was close-up and clear.

Its sheer size caught Akira off guard, but he was more intrigued than alarmed. *So that’s a tankrantula? It’s even bigger than I imagined*, he mused.

Like some gigantic spider, it towered over three stories high, with an exoskeleton resembling plate armor covering its body. Legs protruded not just from its head but from its abdomen as well—sixteen in all. Each half of its body carried two artillery pieces, like those which tanks carry, for a total of four cannons. Gigantic tank treads, several times a human’s height, carried its lower body.

Before such an awesome sight, your garden-variety hunter might have turned tail in an instant—but Akira only watched in amazement as the tankrantula stabbed one leg through the remains of a large, smoldering truck like a shish kebab and raised it to its mouth. The pulverizers in its mouth crushed up what was left of the vehicle like teeth, reducing it to scrap before the monster swallowed the remains whole.

Did you see that? It just ate that truck! Must be dinnertime.

Seems like it. I’d say that vehicle was left here by a hunter that tried to go up against it and failed.

Talk about an omnivore... He imagined his own vehicle getting devoured, and grimaced.

The tankrantula had already finished its meal. Akira had thought it would take longer to eat since the truck had been considerably larger than

was standard, but the behemoth must have had a bigger appetite than he'd assumed.

It's already done? Just how hungry was that thing, anyway?

Larger monsters need more food, and this one doesn't seem to be picky.

Akira reflected. *Is this one of those mutants you were mentioning earlier?*

Alpha nodded. *That's right. This one likely mutated within the Yonozuka Station Ruins after consuming a lot of prey. Then, once it grew large enough that the food within the ruins couldn't satisfy it anymore, it ventured outside.*

Well, that makes sense. I can't imagine something that size could stay inside the ruins for long. So it got this big by gorging itself in the ruins, then?

This made sense to Akira, but Alpha shook her head.

Not quite. It most likely reached its current size from predating in the wasteland.

Huh? Akira looked puzzled. *But there aren't as many monsters outside the ruins, right? Wouldn't it have to have eaten most of them down inside Yonozuka?*

Alpha smiled. *Who said the prey had to be other monsters? In fact, there's a certain type of food I'm thinking of that seems rather eager to deliver itself right to the monster on a silver platter. I'd say that's why it's developed a taste for metal and armor—it had to adapt to its new diet.*

Akira made a face. He knew she was talking about the hunters who had tried and failed to exterminate the beast for the bounty, now devoured along with their equipment and vehicles. Of course the monster had grown so formidable as a result. *No wonder the bounty on its head keeps going up...*

At that moment, Shikarabe's voice burst from Akira's comms. "Tankrantula spotted! Prepare for battle! Draw the enemy's fire, just as we discussed!"

Akira immediately went into battle mode. Since he was far ahead of the pack, he figured he was expected to charge in ahead of the others, so he floored it and sped toward his target.

The sudden burst of speed tossed Togami around in his seat. "Hey, what gives?!"

"We're getting closer so we can draw the enemy's fire, like Shikarabe ordered. Didn't you hear him?"

Togami froze in shock. He couldn't believe that Akira was actually barreling toward an enormous monster without a second thought just because it was part of the plan.

But Akira's next words sent him over the edge. "If you want out, let me know so I can take you to Shikarabe. I can't babysit you and take care of this thing at the same time."

Togami exploded with rage. "Don't screw with me!" he roared. "How dare you treat me like some nuisance! I can handle this a lot better than you can!"

Akira decided to take this as a confirmation that he could go all out. *He says he'll be fine, Alpha, so take the wheel and don't hold back on his account.*

Understood. If he's thrown from the truck, that'll at least save us the trouble of having to launch him back to Shikarabe, Alpha said, smirking.

Hopefully the fight won't be too hard—I'd like an opportunity to do that, Akira replied, his smile grim.

The ride in Akira's truck became much rougher all of a sudden, as it zigzagged across the bumpy wasteland and made hairpin turns on a dime. Alpha drove erratically to draw the tankrantula's attention to the truck and away from Shikarabe, but Togami was too busy trying unsuccessfully to stay in his seat to see the point of these maneuvers.

"Again?! What's your excuse this time?!" he bellowed.

But he grew even more surprised when Akira climbed out of the driver's seat and stood upright on top of the vehicle while it jerked and bounced, as though his balance wasn't affected at all. Togami watched in awe as Akira readied his CWH, the weapon he'd used to wipe the previous target out in one hit.

Don't tell me—he's gonna do it again?! The truck was careening around on a level Togami had never before experienced. Sure, the target was larger this time, but he couldn't fathom Akira aiming properly under these conditions. Yet when he saw Akira hold his rifle at the ready, unperturbed, he found himself actually considering the possibility. *N-No way! If it was me up there, I'd hardly be able to stand!*

Akira pulled the trigger. *Boom!* The rifle erupted, sending a bullet streaking toward the target ahead of them. Togami watched with bated

breath as he gripped the truck's edge anxiously.

Alpha drove recklessly because she suspected the tankrantula had already noticed Akira, and she wanted to steer him away from enemy fire—not to mention the wasteland terrain was already rough to begin with. Normally, anyone would have been immediately thrown from the vehicle if they'd climbed on the roof in such conditions. But Akira held his gun completely steady, as though the turbulence didn't faze him in the least.

This was possible because Alpha had taken control of his powered suit, stabilizing his center of gravity. She was constantly checking the truck's surroundings on his scanner, calculating every single bump the vehicle would make and adjusting Akira's body accordingly. Meanwhile, Akira had slowed down his own sense of time to steady his aim. As the world around him passed by like a calm breeze, Akira had barely felt any disturbance at all. Moreover, a blue line in his vision indicated the precise trajectory the bullet would take from his rifle's muzzle to the target, ensuring that his shot would find its mark.

The moment the truck had felt completely still to him, he'd pulled the trigger.

When the shot erupted from the rifle, the recoil caused the entire truck to shudder as the round pierced the atmosphere between Akira and the target. Although the air resistance slightly slowed its speed, due to the distance it had to travel, he scored a direct hit. The powerful proprietary bullet struck the tankrantula's hard exoskeleton—and bounced off harmlessly.

It did hit—didn't it? Akira was puzzled. With Alpha's support, he shouldn't have missed. So why did it seem like the bullet had had no effect?

Yes, that's right. However, it seems to have been deflected.

You mean even proprietary ammo can't damage it?!

Well, what matters is you successfully drew the enemy's attention. Brace yourself for incoming artillery shells. As I maneuver to avoid them, your footing will become even more unstable, so be careful.

Thanks for the heads-up! Akira lowered his gun and grabbed onto the truck to brace himself.

In truth, the tankrantula had already noticed Akira before he'd opened fire. But the distance between them, plus several large abandoned vehicles nearby that it hadn't yet devoured, had made it ignore Akira for the time

being. Once the bullet struck its shell, however, the monster didn't care whether it had done any damage—eliminating Akira became its top priority. The turrets atop its body swiveled in Akira's direction, lined up a shot, and fired with a deafening roar.

Artillery shells fell all around Akira one after another, threatening to blow him and his vehicle sky-high. But Alpha deftly avoided each of them with precise maneuvering, determining the exact point where each shell would land by calculating their trajectories from the angle they were fired.

Even though she made sure her two passengers were at least safe from harm, however, that didn't mean the ride was comfortable for them. She accelerated, decelerated, and weaved to and fro without warning to avoid the heavy incoming fire. Each time the vehicle jerked and jolted, the immense inertia slammed Akira and Togami.

Akira's suit allowed him to withstand it. With one hand on the edge of the truck to steady himself, he fired the CWH with his other. He had to keep shooting to hold the monster's attention.

The monster's artillery shells landed, dug into the ground, and exploded, kicking up smoke and dust. The impact of each shell against the earth and the subsequent explosion briefly lifted the vehicle into the air, and Akira and Togami experienced a momentary sense of weightlessness before the truck landed hard on the ground. Akira couldn't help but grimace—his legs had flown out from underneath him. If he hadn't been gripping the side of the truck, he would've been toast.

Even so, Alpha wore a serene smile as she spoke. *Looks like the monster's aim is a little more precise than I anticipated. I'm going to try and get closer to keep it from using ranged attacks.*

Cool. You think you could get a little farther away from those exploding shells while you're at it?! You were cutting it a bit close back there!

Oh, that was fine*! A weak shell like that wouldn't take out this truck even if it scored a direct hit.*

The truck, sure, but what about me?!

True, your current powered suit wouldn't be able to withstand a blast like that. You should think about buying a high performance powered suit.

The conversation had started to veer in a different direction, but Alpha didn't care, and Akira was so distraught that he ended up going with the

flow.

No way! Those are bound to be super expensive!

If you take down this tankrantula all by yourself, you won't have to worry about cost.

My gear's not good enough to do that yet!

Then I guess you'd better start saving.

Wow, thanks! Akira replied sarcastically.

But Alpha only smiled her usual smile.

◆

Meanwhile, Shikarabe and his comrades were watching Akira fight via a monitor. At seeing his fighting style, which one could only call reckless, Parga grinned.

"That kid's got guts! I can see why he's already a member of the hundred million club."

Yamanobe also looked impressed. "And he's performing his role as a decoy well. It's a bit earlier than we planned, but maybe we ought to go ahead and do our thing, Parga. Open the hatch, Shikarabe!"

Shikarabe pressed the button to activate the transport vehicle's back hatch. Like Akira's truck, the transport vehicle was moving at high speed, and the hatch gradually opened to reveal the ground quickly receding into the horizon. "Remember, don't overdo it, you two. Once you're done, get as far away as you can, as quickly as possible."

"Yeah, yeah, we get it. I might have gotten a little fired up when I saw the size of that thing, not gonna lie, but I'm not gonna die here trying to show off," Yamanobe replied.

"I'm not the type to go out in a blaze of glory," Parga added. "I'll leave that to someone else. Rest assured, we're just gonna do what we always do."

Shikarabe looked relieved that his two comrades weren't going to bite off more than they could chew, his expression softening a bit. "All right. Then let's go!"

"No. 2, operation start!"

"No. 3, operation start!"

Yamanobe and Parga deployed out the back hatch into the desert wastes.

The inertia from exiting a moving vehicle made their bikes skid a bit upon impact, but the two veteran hunters kept them upright with expert handling as they sped up. Zooming past the transport vehicle, they each took separate paths as they homed in on the tankrantula.

◆

Meanwhile, Akira drew closer and closer to the tankrantula as the truck continued to dodge its fire. If he hoped to do any damage to the monster, he would have to shoot at close range, he determined; and besides, getting up in its face would draw the enemy's attention away from his teammates.

Once he had come within a suitable range, he fired again, and another CWH proprietary bullet struck the monster's exoskeleton. From this distance, the shot had much more power to it—instead of bouncing away, it tore off a plate of the monster's armor.

But that was just the behemoth's exterior. Underneath was another plate of armor, fresh and unharmed, which then shifted forward to replace the missing one. It was as if the tankrantula hadn't suffered any damage at all.

Akira made a face. *You're telling me even a proprietary bullet at this range isn't enough? What do I have to do to damage it—press the barrel of the gun right against its body? What do you think, Alpha?*

I imagine that would at least hurt it somewhat, but getting so close is far too risky. Just focus on drawing the enemy's fire for now, and wait for further instructions from Shikarabe.

Okay, sounds good!

The truck made a hairpin turn, nearly tilting on two wheels, as an artillery shell streaked across the sky above. The wind from the swerve tousled Akira's hair, rippled the skin on his face, and even blew away his sweat. But a fresh bead of cold sweat ran down his forehead when he saw where the shell exploded.

Whoa, that was close! Alpha, a bit less rough next time! I know I'm not one to talk, but I'm starting to understand the importance of safe driving, Akira said wryly.

Really? The two of you are alive and in one piece. What could be safer than that? she replied.

Well, I suppose... In all honesty, Akira would've liked to press Alpha

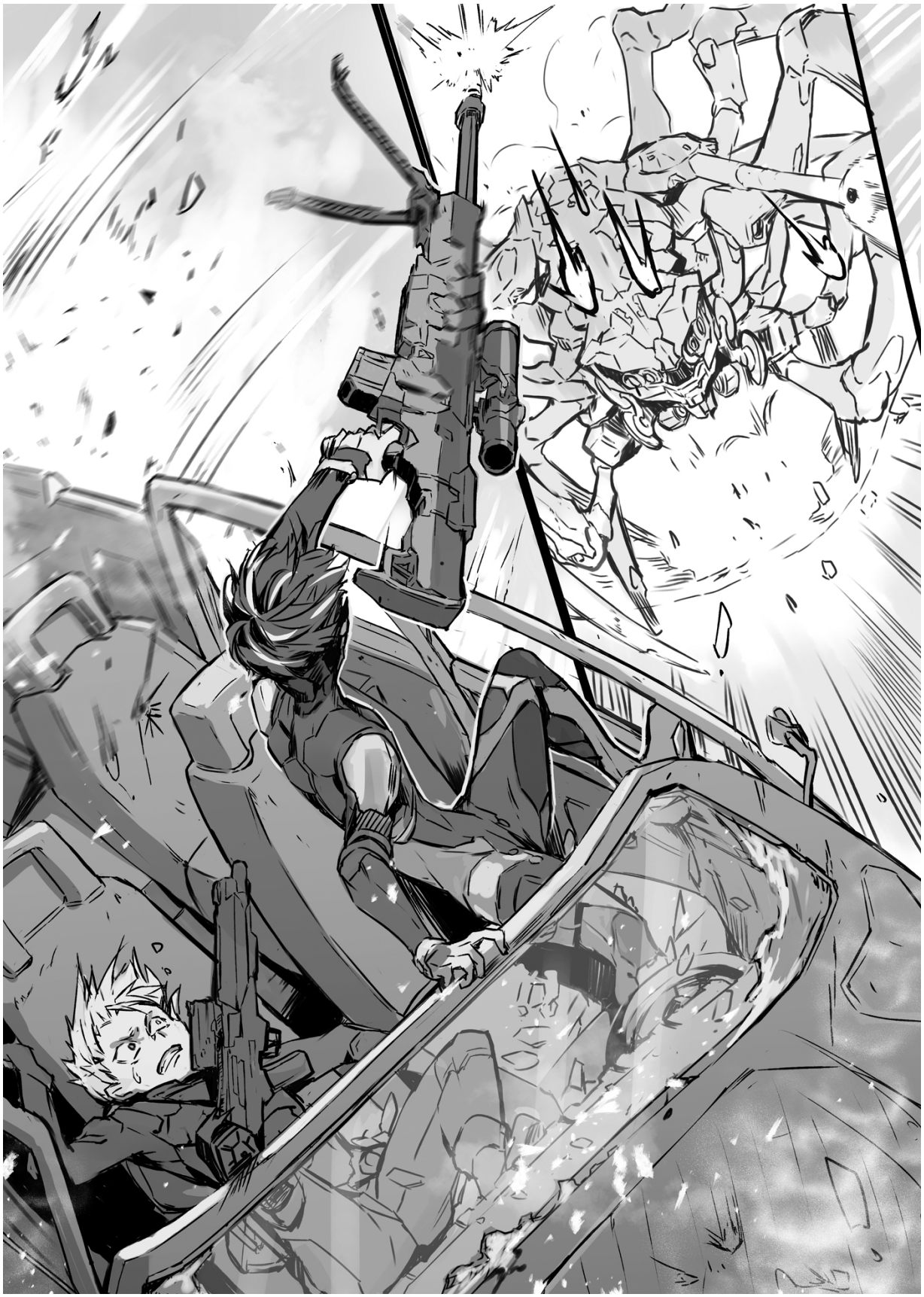
further on her definition of “safe,” but he was too preoccupied with his own battle to argue, or to worry about the well-being of the other young hunter in the truck with him.

◆

Akira’s absurd marksmanship earlier had shaken Togami’s self-assurance, and now he was champing at the bit to prove himself. He couldn’t wait to show off that skill he was so proud of and become the MVP of the entire hunt so he could regain his lost confidence. So he’d been prepared to take on a bit more risk.

However, that resolve meant little in the face of his current predicament. The truck he was riding in was streaking back and forth across the wasteland to avoid the enemy’s barrage. It frequently changed speed or turned without warning, and the shock waves from explosions kept jerking him in different directions. If he let his guard down the slightest bit, he’d be thrown from the vehicle in an instant. It took every ounce of his skill just to keep his balance, and Togami stole a look at his fellow passenger, who should’ve been in the same situation.

Yet while Akira did have one hand on the edge of the truck, he was dutifully holding his rifle in the other, continuing to fire at the tankrantula.



J-Just who the hell is *this guy?! He said his rank was 21?! Yeah, right! A mere rank 21 hunter wouldn't be able to do what he did!* Even if Akira's earlier shot had been just a fluke, Togami could no longer deny that the lower-ranked hunter was displaying an absurdly high level of skill.

Since a truck on auto-drive couldn't avoid all those shells on its own, and since the vehicle belonged to Akira, Togami figured that Akira had to be controlling it remotely. Modern technology made it possible to operate a vehicle by wirelessly connecting to the vehicle's control unit via data terminal—but managing to drive the bumping, shaking truck while perched on its roof and firing at a nearby monster was frankly beyond the pale. When Akira succeeded in hitting his mark on top of all that, Togami knew he could no longer chalk the young hunter's skill up to pure luck or coincidence—and this terrified him.

His face twisted in despair. If he wanted to be recognized, he had to join Akira and draw the enemy's attention with his own fire—he hadn't come along just to sit in the truck and do nothing. But while he chided himself for his own inactivity, he knew he'd be thrown from the truck the moment he tried to stand up. Helpless, he could do nothing.

A-Am I actually *dead weight?* he wondered. *Dammit!* The truck was bouncing so violently that he would've bit his tongue if he'd opened his mouth, so he could do nothing but seethe in silence. That the current situation didn't even allow him the luxury of speaking up was all the more damaging to his ego.

◆

Once Yamanobe had driven close enough to the tankrantula, he took up a position from which he could carry out his task.

"Looks like Shikarabe had nothing to worry about. They're doing just fine as decoys," he mused to himself. He was pleasantly surprised that the other hunters were properly drawing the enemy's attention away from him—it would make his own job easier.

But something else struck him as odd.

"I wouldn't have thought we'd have *two* prodigies here, though. Akira I more or less expected, since he's a hundred-million hunter and was personally recommended by Shikarabe, but No. 4—Nelgo, was it? If the

guy's that skilled, why would he need to even join us in the first place?"

Nelgo was one of the non-Druncam hunters who Parga had recruited. He was a cyborg, and stood out from others because he had four arms. Like Akira, he had closed in on the tankrantula in his own truck and was firing a massive gun, one shot after another, to keep the enemy focused on him. Unlike those who had joined this expedition because they needed money, Nelgo was participating because he wanted to be admitted into Druncam. In return, Shikarabe had promised Nelgo he'd recommend him as long as Nelgo showed sufficient results.

"According to Parga," Yamanobe mused, "Nelgo wants to join Druncam through us because he can't go through the syndicate's official channels for some reason. The question is, who'd he piss off badly enough for them to blacklist someone that talented?" It seemed like there was more to the story, but now wasn't the time to dwell on it—not when there was work to be done. "Well, whatever. I ought to just be happy he's drawing the monster's fire for now. Makes my job that much easier. Right now I need to focus on that."

Looking determined, Yamanobe sped up on his bike, aiming the gaping muzzle of his enormous gun—which, considering its size, might have been more appropriately called a cannon—at the tankrantula. As the monster was focused on pelting the decoy hunters with shells, it failed to notice Yamanobe as he carefully sighted it and pulled the trigger.

A small device shot out, covered in a strong adhesive, which stuck right where it landed on the monster's body.

The tankrantula felt the device strike it but determined that it hadn't been harmed, and so prioritized dealing with the more powerful barrage from Akira and Nelgo. Thanks to that, Yamanobe was able to affix many more devices to its exterior with ease, until the tankrantula's entire body was covered in them. With that, Yamanobe's job was finished, and he contacted Parga to let him know he was up next.

"No. 2 here. Marking complete. Guidance devices set," he said.

"No. 3, roger. Head on back," came Parga's voice.

"Nah, I'd better stick around for support. Don't want you fouling this up, after all," Yamanobe teased.

"Thanks a lot, jackass."

Now it was Parga's time to shine.

Parga was already near the tankrantula, yet just far away enough to keep the enemy's attention on the decoys. He'd be safe at that distance as long as he didn't fire.

When he received Yamanobe's call, however, he grinned and boldly crossed that line, driving his bike closer. The tankrantula noticed Parga's approach and immediately targeted him, its guns swiveling in his direction. Akira and Nelgo concentrated their fire, hoping to pressure the monster into aiming at them once more, but Parga paid the turrets no mind and even accelerated.

The tankrantula tried to line Parga up in its sights as he sped forward. Before it could do so, however, the veteran hunter readied his massive grenade launcher, smirked, and fired. Countless grenades sailed through the air, emitting huge plumes of smoke as they landed. Some stuck to the monster's body instead of exploding, but they all spewed smoke everywhere, much like smoke bombs.

Parga kept firing, and the grenade launcher kept reloading itself automatically with the large stock of projectiles stored in his bike's ammo bin. In no time at all, the entire area was blanketed in thick smoke.

A massive artillery shell meant for Parga flew through the smoke—but missed. Several more followed, but none of them hit their mark: the monster's targeting had been compromised. As soon as he saw that the smoke had been effective, Parga retreated.

The tankrantula would have undoubtedly hit Parga if he'd used regular smoke grenades. But the smoke that Parga had scattered could block not only vision but infrared light, ultrasonic waves, and other ways that monsters usually perceived their targets—in other words, it was jamming smoke.

Once Shikarabe heard from Yamanobe and Parga that they'd been successful, he ordered them to fall back immediately and switched his communicator to the general channel all the participants shared. "No. 1 here! I hereby grant permission to use the missile launchers! Everyone, get close enough to the tankrantula to lock on, and when I give the order, we all fire at once! Do *not* fall behind under any circumstances!"

He gave a wide grin. If everything went as planned, this would finish the

behemoth once and for all.

◆

When Akira saw the tankrantula get swallowed up in the cloud of smoke, he made a face. The enemy was large and therefore an easy target, but all the smoke made it hard to get a bead on it regardless. Realizing that he could no longer hit the creature head-on, he became more cautious.

A smoke screen, huh? What a pain! What do you think we should do, Alpha? You think we'll be able to beat it?

Don't worry. That's jamming smoke, so it's a tactic Shikarabe and his comrades cooked up, not one of the tankrantula's attacks. Alpha explained how the grenades had been fired at the tankrantula, and zoomed in Akira's vision as she spoke so he could see for himself.

Suddenly, the tankrantula became clear in his sight. She'd finished adjusting the display to make it compatible with the jamming smoke. Since Akira had already been given the list of its ingredients, his scanner had been easy to configure.

Wow, now I can see the tankrantula perfectly, but it can't see me. Talk about convenience! Honestly, if it makes things this easy, maybe I really should've bought that one earlier.

You mean in Katsuragi's trailer? Sorry, but a cheap model like that wouldn't be able to do anything like the stuff Shikarabe and his companions are using.

Their smoke was of a special kind—it allowed you to clear up the white noise normally emitted by such products and restore scanner functionality, provided you knew the smoke's ingredients and tuned your scanner accordingly. It was complicated to manufacture, and very expensive as a result. Shikarabe and co. had purchased lots of these high-priced devices so that when they crippled the enemy's detection, their allies' scanners wouldn't be crippled along with it.

Hearing Alpha's explanation, Akira seemed impressed. Alpha gave him a knowing grin.

Considering how many of those they deployed and how much a single one of them runs, she continued, *I'd imagine they spent quite a bit. Since it's a powerful bounty monster, I guess they figured they had to splurge to win. I*

wonder how much of that reward money's going to be left over?

Akira's face went rigid. Shikarabe had said the participants' pay would come from the amount remaining after deducting expenses, after all.

I sure hope there's still some money left in the end, don't you? Alpha teased.

I-I'm sure it'll be fine, Akira responded.

At that moment, Akira received Shikarabe's transmission granting the use of missile launchers. To distract himself from his growing anxiety about his pay, he set to work preparing them immediately.

The tankrantula continued to miss its targets. Even if it tried to escape from the cloud of smoke, the source of the smoke was attached directly to its body, so it would be covered again in no time at all regardless of where it went. Now that the threat of incoming artillery had drastically decreased, Alpha's driving calmed down, and Togami was finally able to stand. Gingerly getting to his feet, he managed to regain his posture despite his extreme fatigue.

"H-Hey," he called out to Akira before he could stop himself. Even he had no clue what he wanted. To complain about Akira's awful driving? To ask how the other boy had gotten so strong? To try and excuse the fact that he himself had been so completely useless? All these ideas clashed with each other in his mind before he could get any of them out, so he ended up saying nothing at all.

Akira took Togami's utterance and subsequent silence to mean that he wanted a missile launcher as well, and tossed him one along with some ammo. Then, leaving the dumbfounded Togami to his own devices, Akira continued preparing his own launcher. He already had the monster within the weapon's optical sight, and the screen indicated that the automatic guidance system was active.

Shikarabe's voice came over the comms. "In fifteen seconds, everyone will fire their missiles! This is why we brought you all along, so don't screw it up! You miss the timing, you can kiss your pay goodbye!"

Togami hurriedly readied his launcher.

"Five! Four! Three! Two! One!" came Shikarabe's countdown. Akira already had his launcher ready to fire. Togami barely managed to make it in time.

"Zero!"

Akira and all the other hunters fired their missile launchers simultaneously. The missiles flew toward the tankrantula one after another, and when they neared their target, they changed trajectory and tilted high into the sky. The minor discrepancies in the missiles' individual flight paths and the timing with which they'd been fired were automatically corrected, and they came together to form a single cluster. Then they fell as one, striking their target almost simultaneously.

The countless blasts from the missiles formed a huge explosion. Flashes of light rippled across the wasteland, and the tankrantula was instantaneously engulfed in a flame large enough to singe everything near it. The shock wave even reached Akira and his truck, causing the latter to shudder violently.

Akira was half-frozen in awe as he observed the spot where the tankrantula had stood. *Whoa! So that's the level of firepower it takes to bring down a bounty monster.*

He was surprised at the excessive attack, but he figured there was no way the tankrantula would be left standing after that, and relaxed.

Alpha warned, *It's too soon to let your guard down. We haven't confirmed it's dead yet.*

Huh?! Completely shocked, he unconsciously looked in Alpha's direction. He usually refrained from doing this because he knew that to anyone unable to see her, he'd seem off his rocker if he suddenly turned to stare at nothing, but now he was so surprised he did so anyway. *Y-You've gotta be joking, Alpha! There's no way that didn't finish it. Even if it did manage to survive, it's got to at least be on the ropes after an onslaught like that. Now we've just got to keep firing missiles at it until it finally dies—*

Look. Alpha cut him off. The explosion had cleared away all the jamming smoke, and the figure of the tankrantula was now visible even to the naked eye. It had lost several of its legs, and its metallic gun turrets had been blown off. Its gigantic underbelly was dented and warped. The tank treads on its lower half had ceased to function.

Even so, the tankrantula was still in one piece. It had taken the full force of that explosion—and still survived.

It tried to drag its body forward on its remaining legs, but even those that were left were severely damaged, and fewer legs meant a heavier burden on each. Several more broke under the weight of the monster's own

massive girth, and it collapsed to the ground with a huge crash.

N-No way! It can still move?! Wait, no, it stopped. Looks like it can't move anymore. Did we win?! The resilience of the tankrantula had initially shocked him, but when he saw it motionless on the ground like a corpse, he breathed a sigh of relief.

Then Shikarabe's voice came over the wireless. "One more time ought to do it. Once we update the missile guidance system, we'll hit it again exactly the same way. Everyone, ready your launchers."

"No. 2, roger. I'll be done before you know it."

"This is No. 3. What should I do? Reapply the jamming smoke?"

"Let's hold off until we know for sure what state the target's in. Let me see... All right, looks like it's lost its ability to fire from long range, so I don't think we'll need it again. Let's save the rest for the next bounty monster. Of course, the situation could change, so be ready to move out at any time."

"Gotcha. Well, if its main cannons are unusable, I don't see us needing the smoke, though— Wait, what the hell?!"

Every single communicator in the vicinity transmitted Parga's scream.

Each of the hunters reacted differently to the monster's apparent demise. Some were certain they had won and completely let their guard down. Others remained vigilant since the monster was still technically alive.

But regardless, they all assumed without a shadow of doubt that they had the overwhelming advantage, the monster was on the ropes, and all they needed to do now was deliver the coup de grâce.

Then a scene unfolded before Akira's eyes that crushed every single one of those beliefs.

The underbelly of the tankrantula, already dented and torn, split farther down the middle. From that crack in its exterior, a flood of mini tankrantulas poured out. The spiderlike creatures engulfed the area in no time. Compared to their gigantic mother, they were tiny, and some of them were smaller than others—but most were still over two meters high. Each came equipped with their own tank treads, and they formed a gigantic spider cluster as they sped toward Akira and the others.

One of the minis aimed at Akira's truck with its miniature turret and fired. The small shell landed right next to the truck and exploded. While the

blast wasn't as powerful as those from the mother tankrantula, several direct hits from them could even reduce a sturdy desert utility vehicle like Akira's to scrap. Alpha immediately brought the vehicle to life, making it speed away. The mini tankrantula cluster concentrated its fire on the fleeing target, leaving a trail of exploding shells in its wake. Togami's terrified screams echoed across the wasteland.

Still atop the undulating vehicle, Akira switched out his weapons. He took his CWH in his right hand and his DVTS minigun in his left. Dual-wielding, he began peppering the cluster with gunfire as it pursued him. Thanks to the DVTS's extended magazines, the continuous stream of bullets didn't let up. The tinier tankrantulas within the cluster were instantly reduced to scrap metal, while the larger ones that managed to withstand the initial spray received the full force of the CWH proprietary ammo. The moment Akira aimed and pulled the trigger, those more resilient tankrantulas were blown to pieces.

Yet Akira's expression remained serious. *They're weaker than the mother, sure, but there's way too many of them! I can't handle them all!*

Just focus on reducing their numbers for now. The thinner the herd, the less of a threat they'll be.

Roger!

He'd destroyed a good portion of the group by this point, but the remaining monsters trampled the corpses of their fallen comrades and continued their dogged pursuit. All the while, more children continued to pour from the mother tankrantula's underbelly—so many that, curiously enough, they seemed to greatly exceed the capacity of the mother's body. The hail of shells from the growing cluster of mini tankrantulas became heavier, blanketing the entire area.

Alpha continued to steer the truck away from the shells with precision as always, but the onslaught became so dense that even she wasn't able to avoid them all. One struck the hood of Akira's truck, sending it careening off course. The blast was so intense that Akira just barely managed to keep from being thrown off the roof.

Alpha! Can't you avoid those a little better?!

It'll be fine. One measly hit from a shell that small isn't going to do much damage.

You're talking about the truck again, right?! What about me?!

Oh, hush. Don't worry about that—just concentrate on reducing their numbers for now, like I told you earlier. The more of them you destroy, the less chance the shells will hit you, right?

Fine, I get it! I've just got to kill them all, right? Piece of cake! he replied sarcastically, and continued to hit the enemy mob with salvos of CWH and DVTS gunfire. With Alpha's support, all of his shots were optimized for maximum damage. Countless tankrantulas were annihilated, and the dense cluster became thinner and thinner.

Even so, it wasn't enough to turn the tables. The mini tankrantulas were small, but they had spawned from a bounty monster nonetheless. Each one was more powerful than an average monster. As long as they continued to pursue Akira as a group, his back would be up against the wall.

The bounty hunt had taken a severe turn for the worse before they were even able to launch a second offensive.

Chapter 94: Taking Down the Bounty

To manage the glut of mini tankrantulas continuing to pour from the mother unit, the Druncam veterans had no choice but to step in. Akira and the other non-Druncam hunters were doing what they could, racing around the wasteland in their individual vehicles, but the outlook remained grim.

"Ignore the fleeing ones!" came Shikarabe's next order. "You're not gonna get a bigger payout from bagging more of them! If they're guarding the mother, they'll disperse anyway once we kill it! Taking down the mother is your top priority! No. 2, how's the marking coming?"

"This is No. 2! It's no good! I'm trying to set the guiding devices on the mother's body, but its children are crawling up and destroying them! W-Wait... No! The smaller ones are tearing the guiding devices off the mother and carrying them away! They're taking them over to your transport vehicle, No. 1! If we don't change the guiding settings, the missiles are gonna target you instead!"

"Dammit! Well played, since the mother unit can't move!" Shikarabe growled. "The barrage will be slightly less powerful, but there's no helping it! Switching the guidance settings to the mother's coordinates instead! No. 2, focus on taking out the children for the time being! Everyone with a missile launcher, we fire one minute from now! Time your fire with the automated countdown that I'm sending to all your communicators! I repeat..." Shikarabe gave the order once more before starting the countdown.

A robotic voice began to drone, "Fifty-nine... Fifty-eight... Fifty-seven..."

Shikarabe's orders were transmitted through all the hunters' communicators simultaneously. So his commands reached their ears, but most were too focused on their own survival to comply.

◆

Akira continued to put up a fight, his face the very picture of grimness. He was already surrounded by the tankrantula cluster, but that wasn't the only reason for his concern.

Alpha! Why am I the only one putting up a fight?! No one told me this was a solo mission!

The mini tankrantulas were clearly concentrating their attacks on Akira's truck, with their second priority being Shikarabe's armored transport vehicle. Most of the auxiliary hunters they regarded as an afterthought. In a sense, it was thanks to this that the weaker hunters weren't completely wiped out. But Akira could only see it as a cruel prank of fate.

Looks like because you destroyed so much of their forces, the enemy's battle algorithm judged you as their biggest threat. Akira's bad luck strikes again!

Akira gave a wry smile. *So this is all because of my bad luck, huh? Then* —he forced a bold grin despite the overwhelmingly adverse circumstances —*I'll just fight my way out like usual!*

Alpha smiled at his resolve and encouraged him. *That's right. Just like always, use your strength to kick that bad luck to the curb!*

She overrode the truck's control unit, turning the wheels ninety degrees and driving the truck sideways. Akira's powered suit helped him combat the ensuing inertia. He would've been helplessly thrown from the truck if his center of gravity were even a little off, but despite his unstable footing, he managed to continue firing both guns, without any regard for conserving ammo.

The car made two full 360-degree turns, and thanks to Alpha's override he could send bullets in all directions. The DVTS minigun chewed through the massive cluster. As the bullets spread out, they inevitably grew less concentrated; but because of his extended magazines the stream was still plenty dense enough. The heavy bullet storm mowed down the mini tankrantulas, littering the wasteland with exoskeletal remains and metallic parts. The red dots on the overhead map in Akira's vision disappeared one by one, until finally the surrounding area, once a sea of red, was just a colorless circle.

But in no time at all, a new wave of red dots encroached upon the circle once more, revealing beyond a doubt how many enemies still remained. The area was already littered with tankrantula debris, yet the enemy's

artillery showed no sign of letting up. Akira was starting to get seriously frustrated. It was dawning on him that the enemy numbers were clearly abnormal.

Alpha, aren't there way too many of them? After killing so many, shouldn't that have been all that mother tankrantula could carry? It wasn't like he was the only one fighting, after all. Shikarabe, his comrades, and the non-Druncam hunters were all doing what they could—some more successfully than others—to reduce their numbers.

Unfortunately, Akira, I have some bad news regarding that, Alpha replied.

Bad news? Wait, they're not increasing their numbers by dividing into smaller ones or anything, are they?

Thankfully, no. But reinforcements are gathering here from other areas. That's why it looks like they haven't thinned out at all even though you eliminated all the minis nearby. The tankrantula had likely spawned a large number of offspring before the battle began, releasing them into the wasteland. And once the creature had fully matured, it had called upon its children to guard it from harm.

Akira made a face. *That explains why their numbers aren't dropping, then. Well, at least they aren't splitting into smaller units. That'd be too much.*

Meanwhile, the robotic voice from the communicator continued to count down to the missile launch: "Five, four, three, two, one, zero." Akira had his hands so full with the mini tankrantulas that he missed the launch window and didn't have a chance to join in this time. Fortunately, Togami was able to fire Akira's as well as his own, and some of the auxiliary hunters managed to fire in time too. Ten missiles in all hurtled into the air. Just as before, they changed course in midair and, in line with the guidance system, headed for the mother tankrantula. But the shells from the minis in the vicinity intercepted several before they could impact, and only six ended up hitting their mark—not enough firepower to finish off even the damaged, immobile mother unit.

A small shake of Alpha's head confirmed to Akira that the offensive had been a failure, and he couldn't help but let out a sigh of despair.

Man, that thing really is tough! If this salvo had been just as powerful as the first attack, it probably would've worked...

That's why we need to take care of the smaller units first, at least until the other auxiliaries are freed up enough to launch their missiles. Most of the auxiliaries had their hands full just dealing with the mini tankrantulas. Shikarabe attempted to mow down enough of the small monsters with the transport's machine gun to give the non-Druncam hunters some breathing room, but that was all the support he could offer.

Guess I just gotta do what I can for now.

That's right. I'll be right behind you as your support, so do your best! You can do it!

Alpha's encouragement stirred his resolve, and he sent another hail of bullets at the dense tankrantula cluster. Reloading the minigun with one costly extended magazine after another, he swore in his heart that when all was said and done, he *would* get Shikarabe and company to reimburse him in full.

◆

Hearing the automated voice from the communicator mercilessly counting down, Togami looked grim as he desperately worked to ready his missile launchers. "Twenty, nineteen, eighteen..."

Taking care not to get thrown from the truck, he held one loaded launcher in each hand. There was no need to aim—as long as he fired, the automated guidance system would take care of the rest. All he had to worry about was firing on time.

"Two, one, zero. Fifty-nine, fifty-eight, fifty-seven..." The next countdown began immediately after the previous one. Togami prepared more missiles. Akira had his hands full dealing with the mini tankrantulas and couldn't participate, so Togami dual-wielded the launchers to cover for him. Soon he was ready to fire once more.

It was all Togami could do to repeat that process over and over.

The truck's driving was more stable than before, so he could've helped eliminate the mini tankrantulas if he'd wanted. But when he'd thought about how much more insignificant an achievement that would be with Akira helping him, compared to taking them all out on his own, he'd chosen to handle the missile launchers instead. Now he could point to a clear reason for coming along with Akira, in case anyone scrutinized his

accomplishments during this hunt. Of course, he was well aware that he was just making one excuse after another, but right now he was directing all of his efforts toward not being seen as dead weight.

Even so, Togami trembled with anger at his own powerlessness.

◆

After a while, a larger-than-average mini tankrantula emerged from the cluster to face Akira while he was still busy eliminating the smaller ones. Tough armor covered its entire body, and its giant tank treads propelled it across the wasteland at a speed that legs would normally never be able to achieve.

Akira noticed it and struck it (and the smaller minis) with a spray of DVTS bullets, but while the shots ate into its armor, they didn't slow its advance. He was taken aback, but didn't panic and fired his CWH instead. The proprietary bullet pierced through the monster's thick armor like paper and demolished its head, killing it instantly. The force of the shot blasted its headless body backward through the air.

A beat later, its abdomen burst apart in midair, scattering its contents everywhere. His face froze when he saw what it was dropping—a cluster of even tinier tankrantulas, each about as big as Akira's fist. He fired on impulse, but there were so many it was impossible to annihilate them all. The mother tankrantula's newborn grandchildren descended upon Akira's truck.

What the hell?!

Akira, get rid of the ones clinging to the truck at once! They're trying to eat it!

What?! Akira hurriedly kicked away one of the tiny tankrantulas near him, sending it flying. Then he immediately moved to take care of the others, which Alpha had helpfully highlighted for him in his vision. The truck's plate armor and seats could be replaced, but if the spiders ended up devouring the control unit or the tires, the vehicle was finished. He had to get rid of them posthaste. No need to kill them—he just had to get them off his truck.

Even as he dealt with the tiny spiders, the minis continued to attack, so he couldn't let go of the guns in his hands. Taking care not to accidentally

shoot the truck instead, he blasted away the spiders clinging to the truck's exterior, swatted away the ones atop the seats, and kicked away the ones crawling along the floor.

All of a sudden he heard gunfire near at hand. He reflexively turned to look—Togami had apparently joined the fight against the spider monsters, pistol in hand.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?!" Akira yelled. "Be more careful with that gun! Wait, don't use a gun near my truck at all!"

"They're just pistol bullets, so quit whining! It's a desert utility vehicle—it won't take much damage from a peashooter like this!"

"*Much* damage?! That's *my* vehicle you're talking about!"

While they bickered, the tiny tankrantulas continued to nibble on the truck, and if that wasn't enough, another of the larger minis came speeding toward them. Akira had a bad feeling that this was something he couldn't ignore. If he let the mini be and it collided with the truck, the vehicle would fall over on its side—game over. He fired the CWH in its direction. The proprietary bullet exploded its head, and its body went flying through the air, just like before. Then he peppered the torso with DVTS gunfire before it exploded, hoping that he could destroy the contents before they became a problem.

But the mini tankrantula's armor kept the bullets from piercing through. Instead, the abdomen exploded from within. Inevitably, more tiny spiders were scattered from the explosion and covered the area once again—and just as before, a portion of them drew near Akira's truck.

Again?! Why me?!

Akira, I'm going to try to shake them off, so tell your partner to take care not to fall out, Alpha warned.

"Brace yourself, or you're gonna fall out!" Akira yelled. Togami immediately grabbed onto the edge of the truck, but one of the tiny tankrantulas latched onto his arm. He tried to shake it off but let go of the truck, and inertia sent him reeling. At that exact moment, Alpha made a sharp U-turn. The centrifugal force flung the spiders off the truck—and Togami with them.

Akira tried to grab Togami and pull him back on board, but his hand failed to reach him in time.

◆

Togami's body hung in the air for a moment before crashing to the ground. Thanks to his powered suit he suffered no damage, but he knew he was as good as dead—not only had he lost his grip on his weapon when he fell, he was now surrounded by an enormous mob of mini tankrantulas. Akira's truck, his only hope of survival, disappeared into the distance.

"Dammit! This is bad!" As he cursed, he leaped to the side instinctively. One of the larger minis pounced right where he'd been a moment earlier. The creature, realizing its target had escaped, made a U-turn with its tank treads and charged at him again. Togami reflexively reached for his gun, then froze when he remembered he'd lost it—he was unarmed. "Dammit!"

He couldn't let it end here. He put all his strength, his very will to live, into his fist and punched the spider monster charging toward him as hard as he could. The enhanced power his suit gave him put a huge dent in the enemy's head, stopping it in its tracks; and the recoil from his punch was so strong that the ground underneath him fissured and caved in. At the same time, the force from the collision launched the spider's body into the air, and it crashed noisily to the ground. Its tank treads ground to a halt.

Even so, that hadn't been enough to kill it. Its treads rumbled back to life, and the monster tried harder to pin Togami down with them. Togami immediately shoved the monster back with both hands—an unfavorable position, to say the least. One wrong move, and he'd be trapped. But his strength was starting to give, and he couldn't hold out much longer. He couldn't keep the terror from creeping across his face—this was checkmate.

The sensation of impending death caused his consciousness to accelerate, and the world around him seemed to move in slow motion. Even so, this had no effect other than prolonging his fear for that much longer.

"I'm really...going to die here? Dammit..." Togami uttered in resignation, and his spirit finally broke.

The next instant, the spider before him was crushed beneath Akira's boot.

◆

When Togami was thrown from the truck, Akira grimaced at having an

extra headache to deal with and leaped out himself. Propelled incredibly far with his suit-enhanced legs, he landed on the spider attacking Togami and crushed it underfoot. He'd stomped on it with significant force, considering he was also toting heavy weaponry in both hands, but this still hadn't been enough to kill the spider. However, he had rendered it immobile, which was good enough for now. Using the recoil of landing to leap into the air once more, Akira fired directly down at the monster from above. The CWH's proprietary ammo sent the spider's head flying, and a subsequent volley of close-range concentrated fire from the DVTS minigun sufficed this time to destroy the contents of its abdomen before it could burst apart, and it perished instantly.

Without missing a beat, Akira touched down in front of the awestruck Togami. He cleared the surrounding area with another wide spray of gunfire, then stepped right next to Togami and kicked him as hard as he could, launching him into the air. Or at least, that's how it seemed to Togami—in reality, Akira had only used his armored leg to launch Togami upward, rather than the toe of his boot, but the action had been so swift Togami hadn't noticed.

Togami flew through the air screaming and landed in the back seat of Akira's truck, which had made a U-turn and was just now approaching them. Akira hopped in as well, and the truck made two more sharp U-turns in quick succession to shake off the tiny spiders accumulating on its body.

Togami was dumbstruck, half-frozen in shock. He glanced at Akira in the driver's seat, and despite his muddled state of mind, managed to form words. "Wh-What was that...?"

"Sorry. My hands were full."

Alpha gave a small smile. *I apologize for that. Anyway, now that it's come to this, what should we do with him? Considering it was my fault, I shouldn't be saying this, but I highly doubt he'll be of use anymore even if we do take him along.*

Yeah, good point. Akira thought for a bit and then nodded. *Okay, I got it. Since he's going to drag me down, I'll do what Shikarabe wanted and toss him in the transport vehicle.*

Roger, Alpha replied with a smile, and turned the truck around.

◆

The transport vehicle that Shikarabe and his companions were riding in was also being assaulted by countless tiny spiders, spawned after the mini tankrantulas had been hit with the vehicle's machine gun and burst apart. The vehicle was plenty sturdy, but as long as the spiders kept concentrating on devouring the machine gun, they'd eventually run into trouble. Yet they couldn't use the machine gun on the tiny spiders clinging to the vehicle either. Shikarabe briefly considered ordering the auxiliary hunters outside to take care of them, but then reasoned that those hunters were inexperienced and would probably only end up hitting the vehicle instead, causing unnecessary damage.

"Nothing for it, I guess. Time to take care of this on my own." Clicking his tongue in irritation, he shifted the vehicle into auto-drive and released the back hatch, preparing to head outside. But the sight he saw as it opened left him dumbfounded.

Akira's truck was headed toward him. The boy himself stood atop the vehicle, holding Togami by the collar and shaking him lightly to get Shikarabe's attention so the veteran could be ready to catch him.

"Oh man, he's really going to throw him?!" Shikarabe couldn't help but grin as Akira flung Togami forward. As Togami made an arc in the air, he screamed. Shikarabe deftly caught him with one hand, at least saving him from colliding into the side of the vehicle, before tossing him to the floor with disdain.

"Looks like you've shown up at just the right time, Togami. Can you drive a car?"

Togami was still reeling from the shock of being thrown without having a single say in the matter, and couldn't reply. Shikarabe clicked his tongue again and prodded Togami with his foot.

"Hey, earth to Togami! You hear me?! Drive! A! Car! Can you?!"

"Huh?! O-Oh, yeah, sure I can."

"Then take the wheel while I'm gone. There's only so much auto-drive can handle. If you run into any trouble, contact me over the wireless." With that, Shikarabe opened the ceiling hatch and dexterously climbed up on the roof. The moment he was on top, he started firing at the spiders clinging to the vehicle, rapidly picking them off one by one. The bullets knocked the spiders off and sent them splattering to the ground right before the vehicle ran them over.

Togami was left behind in the vehicle, frozen in shock. It took a bit, but he finally came to his senses and hurried to the driver's seat.

◆

After dropping Togami off, Akira watched as Shikarabe expertly picked off the spiders, and found himself impressed.

Wow. It's crazy he's able to do that without your support, Alpha. How's he planning to manage if he falls off?

You've got to be skilled to put up a fight against a bounty monster in the first place. Stop being so impressed by him and focus on what you need to do.

All right. Akira picked up the CWH and DVTS, which he'd temporarily dropped in order to throw Togami.

Alpha gave him a bold smile. *Now that we don't have to worry about Togami falling out, I'm not going to hold back. It's business as usual from this point forward.*

Right. Wait, you mean you were holding back all this time?!

Of course. Now, here we go!

The truck took off like a rocket, and it was all Akira could do to keep from falling over.

◆

Thanks to Akira and Shikarabe's valiant efforts, the tables were turning ever so gradually in their favor. The influx of enemy reinforcements had dwindled, and the combined strength of Akira, Shikarabe and his comrades, and Nelgo had greatly reduced the enemy's numbers.

Alpha's driving was so erratic that Akira wondered if the control unit would break. He'd fought valiantly, swallowing med capsule after med capsule as he grumbled and complained. But now it seemed as if his efforts were starting to bear fruit, and he wore a smile of satisfaction.

But then Alpha told him that if things continued as they were, the hunters wouldn't win.

His face clouded over. *Huh? But the enemy mob is almost completely taken care of! I don't see any possible way we could lose! Has something*

else bad happened?!

I didn't say we'll lose. I said we won't win. Normally the battle would've been decided by that first all-out attack, but because the situation had grown complicated after that, they hadn't been able to pull off a second attack of that same caliber. What was more, many of the missiles they had prepared hadn't hit their target and so had been wasted. And the tankrantula hadn't just been protected by its own offspring—it had gotten them to carry the corpses of their fallen brethren to it so it could feed. Given enough time and sustenance, it would heal the parts that were damaged and be good as new before long. And even if it didn't heal completely, all it had to do was repair its treads to be fully mobile again. By siccing its offspring on the hunters, the tankrantula had already bought plenty of time. At this rate, it could even escape—the worst-case scenario.

Akira unconsciously glanced in the tankrantula's direction. As he zoomed in with his augmented vision, it seemed to him like some parts were already almost perfectly restored.

Seriously? What are we supposed to do now? If it runs away now after all that, I don't think my heart will be able to take it!

I'd say we're about to get a transmission from Shikarabe regarding just that.

Alpha's guess turned out to be right on the money. The comms crackled to life, emitting Shikarabe's orders.

"All members! We're going to finish things with this next all-out attack! We'll change our missile guidance system settings to prolong their flight as much as possible and attack simultaneously! On my next signal, fire all the missiles you've been issued!" Shikarabe, also having determined that it would be bad news if the tankrantula healed itself any further, decided it was going to be all-or-nothing right here and now. "And if you've already used all your missiles, fire at the tankrantula from close range to keep it from counterattacking! This is our last chance, so go at it like it's the last thing you'll ever do! Failing to kill it here means no reward, which means no pay for any of you!"

Akira let out a scoffing laugh, then breathed a deep sigh. His face had turned grave. *All right. Let's try and win this if we can.*

This is our do-or-die moment, huh? Then let's do instead of die, shall we? Oh, but first, someone's headed your way.

Huh? Who?

At that moment, Nelgo's truck pulled up beside him. He called out to Akira amicably. "Hey! The name's Nelgo. Mind if we join forces for a bit? To tell the truth, I'm pretty much out of the missiles they issued me already."

Akira hesitated before answering. "Okay, I guess."

"Appreciate it!" Nelgo hopped into Akira's truck, while Nelgo's own went into auto-drive mode and trailed behind Akira's.

In truth, Akira was shocked. Nelgo's movement seemed completely natural, even though he'd leaped out of a moving vehicle into another one —carrying the remainder of his missile stock, no less. Not only that, there'd been nearly no shaking of Akira's truck when he'd landed, and he'd made no sound whatsoever.

"What's wrong?"

"O-Oh, nothing. I was just a bit surprised to see you jumped over from your vehicle to mine."

"Well, you know. This high performance cyborg body was pretty expensive, so might as well get my money's worth."

"R-Right..."

"By the way, what's your name?"

"Akira..."

"Akira, huh? Good name. You take care of that name now, you hear?"

"S-Sure. Thanks, I guess..." Akira felt something was off about Nelgo, but he couldn't put his finger on it, which only perplexed him further.

Nelgo held a weapon in each of his four arms as he fired at the mini tankrantulas in the area. Despite being designed for use against monsters, his weapons were all actually rather small, but nothing was small about the force of their bullets. Moreover, each of the guns tracked a different target in their sights, yet the shots were finding their marks with ease. Thus each bullet was just as accurate as it was powerful, and the tankrantulas fell one by one.

Akira came to his senses and hastily joined the fight. Dual-wielding his CWH and DVTS guns, he started firing at the mob, already greatly reduced thanks to Nelgo's efforts.

Nelgo addressed Akira as he continued firing. "You've got some skill. To tell the truth, I've been watching you fight ever since the battle began,

and I don't even have anything to nitpick. As you can see, I'm a cyborg, but might you be one as well?"

"Nah, I'm fully human. I am wearing a powered suit, though."

Nelgo studied Akira closely even as he continued picking off the oncoming spider onslaught. Akira felt a bit put off by this.

"Wh-What?"

"Oh, sorry for staring. You see, due to my line of work, strong hunters like you pique my interest. Even if you're wearing a powered suit, moves like that aren't exactly easy to pull off. Have you received some sort of body augmentation? Or perhaps it's just a product of rigorous training?"

"A combination of training and live combat, really. I haven't augmented my body in any way."

"Seriously? That's rather impressive."

Akira was thrown off guard by this praise, and a doubtful expression appeared on his face. Not because he couldn't accept the praise at face value due to Alpha's support—rather, having a complete stranger show such a strong interest in him made him feel somewhat uneasy.

Wh-Who the heck...? Alpha, do you know anything about this guy?

He's a cyborg—just what it says on the tin. Judging from the way he moved earlier, he seems to be skilled enough to put that artificial body of his to good use. That's all I can tell, though. I gather that the reason he's interested in you is that you've shown a similar level of skill, but I don't know for sure.

I-I see.

Then Shikarabe's voice overlapped with the automated countdown on his communicator, which was still running. "It's about time! Are you ready? When I give the signal, fire everything you have until I give the order to fall back! Anyone who fails to participate in this final offensive will be recognized as dead weight! And dead weight doesn't get paid, even if it's alive!"

"Ten, nine, eight..." The countdown continued. Akira and the other hunters readied their launchers. While Akira only dual-wielded launchers, Nelgo was carrying four of them at once, one in each hand.

"Seven, six, five..."

Meanwhile, Yamanobe and Parga had approached the tankrantula and were planting guiding devices and jamming smoke emitters on its body.

Now that there were far fewer minis, the hunters had been able to get close again and were making every effort to make sure this final attack succeeded.

“Four, three...”

Shikarabe modified the settings for the missiles, adjusting them to ignore any guidance devices that were way off course from the target location. He’d ordered Togami, meanwhile, to pick off the smaller spiders with the machine gun.

“Two, one...”

The non-Druncam hunters also had their launchers ready, desperate to not let this opportunity slip by and miss out on their pay.

“Zero!”

In sync with the countdown, Akira and the other hunters all fired. Countless missiles streaked across the sky. Akira was getting ready to launch another, just as Shikarabe had ordered, when Nelgo stopped him.

“Let me fire your missiles for you. I’ve got more arms, after all. You just focus on keeping the smaller spiders at bay.”

“O-Okay.” The mini tankrantulas around their mother were unable to intercept the missiles this time thanks to the jamming smoke, but the ones outside that proximity could certainly knock the missiles out of the sky in mid flight, since the rockets had been configured to stay in the air as long as they could. Akira prioritized taking out those mini spiders to keep them from interfering. Thanks to Alpha’s support, he was able to intercept their counterattacks with maximum efficiency.

Nelgo expertly fired one missile after another from all four of his arms, but all the while he watched Akira in front of him, studying his movements intently.

Countless missiles lazily circled around the area to prolong their time in the air before suddenly converging into one mass. The moment there were enough together, they all sped toward the tankrantula as one. Each individual missile automatically corrected the discrepancies in its trajectory and launching time, and just as before they struck their target from all directions at almost exactly the same instant. The resulting blast was far more powerful than even that first offensive.

Akira’s truck shook from the shock wave, and he was surprised at the force.

If that doesn't take care of it, then the situation's hopeless!

Don't worry, Akira. Look! Alpha smiled and pointed over to the mother tankrantula, which lay in pieces. The blast had blown it to smithereens. The minis in the vicinity had also ground to a halt. Because most had stopped while moving at high speeds, many of those he saw had fallen over, lying motionless sideways on the ground.

It looks like the mother was controlling them, so destroying it deactivated them. Everything's all right now.

W-We won?

We won, Alpha confirmed with a smile.

Akira breathed a deep sigh. He felt more relief than joy at their victory.

Nelgo, meanwhile, looked calm and composed. "All's well that ends well, huh? Looks like my work here is done, then. It was nice meeting you, Akira. Perhaps we'll cross paths again someday." With that, he boarded his truck and drove away, leaving Akira nonplussed.

Who the hell was *that guy, anyway?*

No idea. But anyway, that's not any of our concern right now.

I guess not. Whew, I'm beat! Akira got back in the driver's seat of his own truck, looking absolutely exhausted. The moment he sat down, his entire body went slack, and he let the fatigue and satisfaction of taking down a bounty monster worth eight hundred million aurum lull him to sleep.

Alpha watched over him, smiling. *Congratulations, Akira. Good work!*

There had been some bumps along the way, but in the end, Akira and the rest of the expedition team had managed to successfully take down the tankrantula. Yet her smile was the same as ever—by Alpha's standards, taking down a behemoth worth a mere eight hundred million aurum was no more significant than defeating a regular monster.

Chapter 95: Cheap Tricks

The bounty monster had fallen, but the hunters' job wasn't over just yet. Before they could receive the payment and recognition for their victory, they had to go through the Hunter Office's verification process.

For the relic hunters, this served to keep any of their unscrupulous peers from claiming the achievement—as well as the exorbitant bounty—for themselves. And their hard-won victory would all be for naught if the Office confirmed that the behemoth was no longer roaming the wasteland, yet denied Shikarabe and the others payment on the grounds that the Office couldn't verify who was actually responsible.

For the Hunter Office, which was supposed to shell out such a large amount for the monster's demise, the verification provided irrefutable proof that the monster was actually dead. The Office couldn't afford to pay the bounty—even to hunters who were skilled enough to take down the target—if there was any chance the beast was still alive.

Therefore, the Office carried out thorough investigations when someone claimed to have exterminated a bounty monster. That way, on the off chance that it came to light after the fact that there'd been some kind of mistake, the Office could show that it had done due diligence and thus peacefully settle the later dispute. Even if the monster was reduced to dust during battle, leaving no corpse behind for the Office representatives to examine, they could still check the combat data on the hunters' scanners. Once the Office verified that the target had been exterminated, the bounty hunt would officially be considered a success.

Finally, in the event that several different hunter teams had fought the monster at the same time, leaving the investigation to the Hunter Office could also quell any disputes over which group had actually brought the target down. Thus, for a variety of official reasons, having the monster's defeat verified by the Hunter Office was extremely important to all involved.

Less officially, it was also true that creatures strong enough to have a

bounty placed on their heads were usually special types that had undergone significant self-modification or mutation. Various corporations were interested in these specimens as research subjects, and even their corpses—whether organic or inorganic—sold at high prices. Under the pretense of its investigation, the Hunter Office had the rights to the target's remains, and if a hunter wanted to keep any of these materials for themselves, additional negotiations were needed. (Some hunters who weren't hurting for money did in fact challenge bounty monsters only for sport or bragging rights, and would end up carting the corpse back home as a trophy to decorate their living room.)

As Shikarabe prepared for the representatives from the Hunter Office to arrive, he ordered the auxiliary non-Druncam hunters to gather up the tankrantula's remains. He had no intention of putting the tankrantula up on his mantel—he just wanted the pieces collected before the officials got here, ready to be handed over in order to expedite the process. Meanwhile, he instructed the hunters who'd put in outstanding effort despite only being auxiliaries, like Akira and Nelgo, to take a well-deserved breather.

The scars the fierce battle had left on the wasteland were still fresh, even as the survivors took some downtime, each in their own way.

◆

Now that he had some free moments, Akira began a late lunch. Laying out on the ground all the varieties of portable rations he'd brought, he spent some time deciding which to eat before finally stuffing his face with a sandwich.

Thanks to how tough the battle had been, he was absolutely starving, so the order to rest couldn't have come at a better time. He'd picked a ration sufficiently filling to satisfy his appetite; and as he took bite after bite, he found himself unconsciously smiling, mostly because his stomach was now content.

Sitting in front of him, Alpha also looked cheerful as she chowed down on a sandwich of her own. But since Alpha had no need for sustenance, the sandwich in her hands was only a hologram—she was merely emulating the experience of eating together with Akira. Yet something about her sandwich

caused Akira to stop chewing and stare.

Hey, why does your *sandwich look tastier than mine?*

You want a bite? Here, say "Aaah!" Still smiling, Alpha brought her holographic sandwich over to Akira's mouth.

The bread looked soft and fluffy. The vegetables seemed to be fresh. The meat was covered in a delicious-looking sauce. In short, the sandwich looked absolutely delectable—even with Alpha's bite marks on it.

Akira scowled. *Stop teasing me, okay?*

It certainly looked delicious enough to dig into, but in the end the sandwich didn't actually exist. The visual information sent to his brain caused his mouth to water and his stomach to rumble, but he'd never be able to eat it. In a way, it was torture.

Oh, guess you can't have any. Sorry about that, Alpha said—with a grin that made it clear she was not one bit sorry. Bringing the sandwich back to her own mouth, she took another big bite as though it really were delicious.

Akira pouted and reluctantly finished the ration in his hand, having to settle for what was actually edible. He'd actually had the same kind of sandwich for breakfast this morning, but now, thanks to Alpha tantalizing him, it seemed far less satisfying. *Okay, that settles it! When we get back home, I'm gonna start eating better. I'm gonna buy the most delicious-looking stuff without worrying about the price.*

Akira's declaration made Alpha nod theatrically. *Now you're getting it! It's important for you to know what luxury feels like. In fact, that's why I teased you—to get you to realize that on your own.*

Liar. You just wanted to see my reaction.

Oh, you wound me! I've never lied to you once, Akira. Don't you trust me?

If Akira replied that he did trust her, he might as well admit she was telling the truth and she hadn't just been poking fun at him. But since he couldn't bring himself to say he *didn't* trust Alpha, he ended up sulking in silence instead. Then, to shut up his growling stomach (which Alpha's tempting meal had only made worse), he grabbed another sandwich and started devouring it like a glutton.

Alpha watched him, smiling in amusement all the while.

◆

Shikarabe and his comrades were resting in the armored military transport vehicle, waiting for the reps from the Hunter Office to arrive and chatting about their earlier battle with the tankrantula. Yamanobe and Parga were all smiles as they talked about their job well done, but Shikarabe didn't look so happy.

He sighed. "I screwed up. A mere eight hundred million aurum wasn't nearly worth the hassle of taking down a behemoth that tough. I should've waited longer."

His harsh self-assessment made Yamanobe chuckle. "Well, it was pretty strong, that's true. They ought to give us more like 1.2 billion for our trouble, don't you think?"

Parga grinned and shook his head. "Nah, 1.4 billion's more like it. Considering all we went through, anything less wouldn't be worth it. Right, Shikarabe?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. I screwed up." Shikarabe hesitated before continuing. "Sorry for roping you into a job that wasn't worth it in the end." He sighed again.

Yamanobe gave a wry smile. "C'mon, man, you'll make Shikarabe feel bad," he said to Parga. Then he added consolingly, "From the start, our only goal was to exterminate the target—we were never hung up on making a profit. Yet we managed to stay in the black anyway—isn't that reason enough to celebrate?"

Shikarabe and his comrades had decided to challenge the tankrantula to gain the upper hand in Druncam's factional dispute. And they'd had to act quickly to make sure no other hunters—either from an opposing faction or outside Druncam entirely—took down the monster first. While their payout could have been bigger if they'd waited longer, this would've made it more likely for someone else to beat them to the punch. Moreover, there'd been no real way to tell if the pay would be worth it short of actually fighting the monster themselves.

Naturally, Shikarabe had kept all of this in mind when determining the right time to start the operation, but he was now realizing that maybe he'd jumped the gun a bit. He sighed yet again, full of regret. "Well, 1.4 billion might've been a bit too much to ask, but we should've at least waited until they raised it to a billion. Oh man, this is bad." Shikarabe held his head in his hands.

Yamanobe looked perplexed at Shikarabe's distress. "Would it have made any difference, though? They might've lowballed us a bit on the pay, sure, but as long as we're not gonna be in the red, who cares? If we're not gonna take a cut of the reward for ourselves, isn't it all the same to us anyway?"

That much was true: Shikarabe and his comrades had promised the hunters they'd recruited that even if they succeeded, the three of them wouldn't be pocketing a single aurum for themselves. But Shikarabe knew that, of course—he was holding his head for another reason. "That's exactly it. We said that after deducting expenses we'd divide the reward among everyone besides ourselves, right? And we also tried to light a fire under their asses by saying we'd adjust their percentage according to how actively they participated."

"Right," Yamanobe shrugged. "So?"

Shikarabe paused before explaining. "Honestly, I wasn't expecting Akira and Nelgo to go all out like they did. After deducting the expenses and dividing the payout, there's no way we're going to be able to give them what they're owed. If we did, there'd be nothing left for any of the other hunters."

"Oh. I see. Yeah, that is a problem." Yamanobe finally understood.

"We can manage Nelgo since all he wanted was an alternative route into Druncam through a third party, but Akira, well..." Akira had accepted an irregular, risky job that hadn't gone through the Hunter Office, so he'd naturally be expecting a reward that made it worth his while. If the job *had* been registered officially and Shikarabe had had the authority of the Office on his side, the Druncam hunter could simply say that the amount had decreased due to unforeseen circumstances and have the contract updated with the new amount.

But if someone tried that with an unofficial job, anyone on the receiving end of such a move would think they were being scammed. High-risk jobs were undertaken with the expectation there would be high returns. Not paying a hunter enough to justify risking their life was the same as undervaluing that life. In most cases, this would result in a bloodbath.

As a veteran hunter, Shikarabe knew well the value of a life, and had no intention of skimping out on paying Akira what he deserved. He also preferred not to have to fight Akira to the death. But what then? Would he

rather refuse to pay the other hunters and risk battling an angry mob of them instead? It wasn't like he wouldn't be able to take them, but it would have a decidedly adverse effect on any negotiating he did going forward. He had to find some kind of way to settle this peacefully and keep all parties satisfied.

Parga gave Shikarabe a big grin. "You're the one who decided to set those terms, bud, so that's on you. Good luck, huh?" he teased.

"I know, I know." Shikarabe exhaled deeply, as if expelling all his dissatisfaction toward the syndicate's current state. If a war hadn't broken out between factions, he never would've landed in this pickle.

◆

Togami was also riding in the armored transport vehicle along with the Druncam veterans, but his relationship with the other three wasn't good enough to join their chat, so he was keeping his distance. Sitting on a bench to the side and looking like he was at his wit's end, he began to fiddle with his terminal. He surfed the net to the Hunter Office's website and brought up Akira's profile page. After a silent wish, he took a look at the hunter rank listed there.

His prayer went unanswered. "It really is 21."

Togami now had no other option but to acknowledge that Akira really was as skilled as he seemed. He'd been hoping against hope that perhaps Akira had lied about his hunter rank to tease Togami, that his actual rank was far higher—but that hope had been dashed. While you could refuse to publicly disclose your hunter rank, you couldn't officially falsify the number—and even if you could, who in their right mind would make it lower rather than higher?

Akira had been telling the truth all along.

"He's rank 21, and I'm 27. But then, how...?" Looking haggard, Togami stood up and walked over to Shikarabe, who noticed his expression.

"What's wrong with *you*?" Shikarabe wondered aloud.

"That Akira guy... Just who *is* he, anyway?"

"Someone I hired from outside Druncam," Shikarabe replied matter-of-factly.

"That's not what I'm asking!" Togami screamed. His sudden outburst

shocked the other three. Normally they would have gotten angry at his insubordination and intimidated him into shutting up, but the hopelessness and desperation on his face took them aback. “There’s no way he’s only rank 21 if he’s that skilled, so who is he?!”

One’s hunter rank was a measure of their overall ability, not just combat skill. There were some hunters who possessed high ranks because they used their outstanding scouting and stealth abilities to collect relics from ruins while remaining undetected by monsters, but who were useless in actual combat. Conversely, there were also incredibly strong hunters who excelled in live combat but were bad at relic-hunting—and because you weren’t considered much of a hunter if you didn’t have loot to show for it, their rank and status within the hunter world remained low.

But these were extreme exceptions that proved the rule. In reality, most of those skilled at scouting and stealth could also hold their own in combat, and even those who were novices at hunting relics would be able to collect plenty without much trouble if they could defeat the powerful monsters in an unexplored ruin. So, in most cases, a hunter’s rank really was an accurate indicator of their skill in combat.

Togami was well aware of this. But he also knew that there were outliers, and he was hoping that Shikarabe had hired Akira because the boy was one of those outliers. His fervent desire drove him to yell even more hotly, “You hired him, didn’t you?! Then you ought to know all about him, right?! Tell me right now—*who the hell is Akira?!*”

Having vented all his emotion, Togami was panting hard.

By now, Shikarabe and company had recovered their cool and exchanged smiles. Parga was the first to reply.

“How should we know?” he said with a grin that implied he knew more than he was letting on, and shot a glance at Shikarabe.

Yamanobe did the same. “Right, we’re not the ones you should be asking,” he said. “Who is that guy, Shikarabe?”

“No idea,” Shikarabe said. “Well, it is true that back in the Kuzusuhara underground we were together for a bit. That’s when I learned he was a cut above your typical rookie, so I invited him on the hunt.”

Togami seemed to calm down a bit. “R-Really? I knew it! I knew someone with skills like that couldn’t be—”

“But then, well, Akira ended up dropping out of that job midway, so I’d

say he's really nothing all that special. Yamanobe and Parga here have even complained to me, asking why I invited such a weakling along."

Parga chimed in, understanding exactly what Shikarabe was up to. "I mean, yeah. Just look at his hunter profile page! If the information on there's to be believed, he's a total noob! And there's no reason to doubt the Hunter Office, right?"

Yamanobe also hopped on the bandwagon and played along. "You're just overestimating your own ability, Parga. You're looking at his hunter rank and automatically assuming he's weaker than you."

"Huh? Really?" Parga said in feigned surprise.

"If you were actually as skilled as you thought you were, you wouldn't misjudge his ability in the first place. A real hunter would be able to accurately tell how strong someone really is without getting deceived by something like rank. That's what it means to be truly skilled. If you ask me, I think you're just a cocky upstart."

"Whaddaya mean?" Parga demanded in a mocking tone. "I'm perfectly skilled. Just look at everything I did against that monster back there!"

As Yamanobe and the other veterans teased Togami, the boy's face became paler and paler, and he started to look ill. Finally, Shikarabe delivered the finishing blow.

"Well, I get that being shown up by someone with a lower hunter rank than you has you all upset, but instead of whining to me about it, maybe you should've focused on showing us some skill befitting of your *own* hunter rank instead?"

Shikarabe knew full well that he hadn't been able to. So did Togami. He also recognized the veteran hunter was insinuating that Togami's ability was far below what his hunter rank implied. The young hunter lost the will to argue and hung his head. "I'm gonna go get some fresh air," he muttered, and exited the vehicle. The moment the door slammed, Shikarabe and his fellow veterans burst out laughing.

Finally, Parga was able to catch his breath. "Damn, Shikarabe, you're heartless," he wheezed, even though he himself had been the main instigator. "I thought you said you were more fond of the Group B rookies? That was awfully mean, don'tcha think?"

"That's rich coming from someone who went right along with it. And I said I was more fond of them *compared to Group A*. They're still leeches

whose equipment is all bought with the money we earn."

"Well, can't argue with that."

"Not to mention they're all way too cocky. Most hunters like that end up dying because they overestimate their own ability and take on more than they can handle. In that sense, we're doing him a favor by knocking him down a peg before it's too late."

"Guess even the worst words can have the best intentions, huh?" Parga mused.

But Shikarabe wasn't finished. "By the way, Parga, you don't really have much room to talk about Togami, do you?" he said, continuing to affect a lighthearted tone. "Back in the bar when you first met Akira, you didn't think he was any big deal either."

Parga went silent, but very obviously averted his eyes from Shikarabe.

Yamanobe gave a wry grin. "Well, Shikarabe, in his defense, Akira *did* seem like a weakling at first. No one could've possibly guessed he was a hundred-million hunter."

Parga jumped to agree. "I know, right?! What kind of hunter with a rank of only 21 would be able to achieve *that*?! Your intuition really is something, Shikarabe! But of course I'd expect nothing less from such a genius-level hunter! There, have I kissed your ass enough?"

"Man, you really are full of it today," Shikarabe chuckled, taking his comrade's half-teasing, half-praising comments in stride.

At the same time, his brain was working behind the scenes. *Yamanobe, Parga, and most likely Togami all misjudged Akira's ability at first too. In other words, there's definitely something strange about that boy.* There was a clear difference between Akira's competency on the field and Shikarabe's intuitive estimation of him, and this disparity continued to confound him.

◆

The Hunter Office representatives finally arrived on the scene. Shikarabe and company handed over the tankrantula remains—the destroyed tank guns, the broken legs, and the shattered armor—along with the combat data recorded in their terminals, finishing all the work that had to be done on-site. Then he sent the rest of the clerical work over to the Druncam offices for them to process.

Shikarabe, Yamanobe, Parga, and Togami were the only ones officially listed as having taken down the monster. Auxiliary hunters were loitering around the area as well, but the Hunter Office didn't press them on their presence there, as this would count as meddling in Druncam affairs. The remains of what used to be the tankrantula were loaded up in an enormous truck, along with some parts from the mini tankrantulas mixed in.

"So, Shikarabe, what's our next move? Are we calling it a day, or continuing the hunt?" Yamanobe asked.

Shikarabe's face clouded over. The original plan after dispatching of the tankrantula had been to go on and scope out the other bounty monsters to gauge their strength, eliminating them as well if possible. They'd even brought ammunition for multiple battles in a row.

But the battle with the tankrantula had proved more harrowing than any of them had expected, and they'd expended much more ammo than they'd counted on. So Shikarabe was leaning toward calling it a day. If they used up the rest of their ammo just gathering intel on the monsters, there wouldn't be much point. Even if they got all the information they needed, there wouldn't be any groups that could immediately move out. While other Druncam veterans besides Shikarabe had staged their own bounty hunts, none had been successful—they'd misjudged the enemy's strength and been forced to make quick retreats. Forming a new force would take several days at the least, and that was too long to wait.

And even if they used all their remaining ammo to weaken the enemy, they didn't have enough to finish it off—and the damage would only make it easier for the next challengers to succeed.

Shikarabe mulled all this over for a while, then came up with an idea. "Yamanobe, Parga: Would you guys be okay with serving as auxiliaries for this next one? At worst, you'd be treated as unofficial, and at best you'd be official, but your names would still be absent from the records."

"I'm willing to go unofficial if the pay's worthwhile," Yamanobe answered. "If official, I'd at least like for the achievement to be listed on my profile page, but again, I can overlook that if the pay's good enough."

"Also," Parga chimed in, "it's gonna be on you if we end up butting heads with the main force, Shikarabe. Is that okay with you?"

"Yeah, I get it," Shikarabe said with a wry grin. But he had their consent, and he immediately took out his terminal and made a call.

◆

Once the Hunter Office vehicles had departed, the non-Druncam hunters started heading back to the city. Watching them go, Akira decided it was about time for him to leave as well.

But just then, Shikarabe called out to him. “Hey Akira! Up for one more fight today?”

Without meaning to, Akira put on a guarded look.

Shikarabe hastened to explain. “Oh, don’t worry, it’s not what you think. It turns out there’s another group fighting a bounty nearby, and we were thinking we’d join in and aid them as an auxiliary force.” He clarified that this time he didn’t expect Akira to perform like he did during the tankrantula battle, but rather to fall back to a strictly supporting role. He wouldn’t stop Akira from rushing in if he felt like it, but primarily wanted him to stick to the safety of the rear and provide additional firepower.

Akira groaned a bit before considering his options. “What if I refuse? What happens then?”

“Well, I’m not going to force you. You’ll go back home, take a good long rest, and be on standby until I let you know it’s time to move out again.” Then, pretending he’d just thought of something else, Shikarabe added, “Oh, wait, that wasn’t what you were asking, was it? You wanted to know if there would be any negative consequences for throwing in the towel. Well, let’s see—if we don’t have enough firepower and something happens to us, we won’t be able to pay you, so keep that in mind. And even if we do manage to survive, the harder our battle is, the more we’ll have to spend, which means less of a payout for you.”

Akira grimaced and sighed deeply. “All right, I get it. I’m coming.”

“Good to hear. Then follow behind us in your vehicle. We’ve got a bounty to take down.” With that, he turned around and left.

Alpha looked surprised. *Akira, was it really okay to accept?*

He and his comrades are gonna be auxiliaries just like me this time, so it should be all right. Probably. Besides...

Besides?

I wouldn’t want them to get badly hurt because I refused to come along. No telling how many hundreds of millions their medical bills would be, and that would use up all the reward money they’re supposed to be paying me.

Even if the only significant damage was to their armored transport, it would still be costly all the same—and Akira would have no way of knowing if they were exaggerating the damage claims unless he came along.

I understand. Then allow me to handle surveillance.

Thanks. That'd be a big help.

And so it was that Akira agreed to join the additional fight—albeit for a somewhat ulterior motive.

◆

As Shikarabe headed toward the next battlefield, he received a call from the person he'd just made a deal with—Kurosawa.

"We're on our way now. Should be there in thirty," Shikarabe said.

"That so? Just to be clear, your unit's okay with me commanding them, right? None of your fellow Druncam hunters are gonna take issue with being under me, even temporarily?"

"It'll be fine. Even if they do take issue, I'll be the one they'll complain to, so no problem. Don't worry about it."

There was a bit of a delay before Kurosawa responded. "Well, if you say so... Also, there's something else I want to make sure of. In the contract you sent over, the only ones listed as participating were the leader—the Druncam hunter Shikarabe—and 'three additional members.' Why is that?"

"Hm? Something strange about that?"

"In the typical Druncam contracts, those three others would usually be listed by name, right? Why'd you go out of your way to change it?"

"Don't worry about that. We're participating as a group, and I'm the leader. That should be good enough, right?"

Shikarabe heard Kurosawa sigh over the terminal. "I wouldn't have thought *you* of all people would resort to cheap tricks, Shikarabe. Getting involved in that syndicate's infighting is only gonna bind you hand and foot in the end, you idiot."

Kurosawa had once also belonged to Druncam. However, as Druncam grew and opposing factions started to crop up, the desk jockeys' rise to power made the situation so bad that Kurosawa couldn't take it anymore and cut his ties with the syndicate.

But Shikarabe had stayed, and just as Kurosawa had predicted, he'd

gotten wrapped up in the syndicate's internal affairs.

"I know," Shikarabe responded with a rueful smile. "But what choice do I have? If it goes on like this, every single aurum we earn's gonna go to the brats. Even if those rookies were responsible for Druncam's growth in the first place, I have to do something about this. I'm not willing to cut my losses like you were—not yet, anyway."

Kurosawa's tone sounded a bit gentler. "Fine. I'm not done lecturing you just yet, but I suppose we can save it for later over a drink or something once this job's in the books. So there are four of you, then? No matter how many you have with you right now, there are only four, and your pay will be divided between you four. Do I have that right?"

"Yeah. Glad you understand. Oh, and one more thing—there's going to be a kid mixed in, so don't be surprised when you see him. Just ignore him."

"A *kid*? I thought you hated rookies. Isn't he just gonna drag us down?"

"Don't worry about that. I guarantee you he can pull his own weight."

"I certainly hope so. See you on the battlefield." Kurosawa hung up.

Shikarabe heaved a sigh. He knew full well he was resorting to cheap tricks. He knew he was being roped into participating in something bothersome and annoying. As a veteran hunter, he honestly wondered what the hell he was even doing. But even so, Shikarabe couldn't abandon Druncam after all this time. In the end, he couldn't cut his losses.

◆

The Minakado Ruins were desolate and abandoned, lined with half-destroyed skyscrapers and other high-rise buildings. The ruins' treasures had already been plundered long ago, and thus no longer held any value as a relic hunting site. And because the monsters roaming the ruins were so strong, normally no one even set foot here.

But recently it had become more popular again—the multigun snail, one of the monsters that had been designated as a bounty, had taken up residence there. And so Shikarabe and his crew had come here as well. The snail's bounty had started at one hundred million aurum, but had now already ballooned to a staggering one and a half billion. That indicated just how strong it was—and how badly everyone wanted it dead.

The multigun snail was about as tall as a two-story building. Its name came from the countless cannons that grew from its enormous metallic carapace, and which it used to obliterate its enemies. But the hunters aiming for the bounty on its head had fought back just as fiercely. Now its tough shell was cracked in many places, and its guns were being destroyed faster than they could regenerate—before long, the "multi" part of its name would no longer be accurate.

Even so, its largest and oldest cannon was still active. Hefting this massive ordnance on its back, the snail now scaled the side of a collapsed skyscraper. Its movements seemed slow from far away, but an observer near at hand would find it moving about as fast as a car. When it reached the top, it tilted its huge cannon upward to fire at a target it had detected beyond the ruins.

◆

As Shikarabe and company proceeded toward the Minakado Ruins in the armored military transport, a call came in from Kurosawa.

"You've gotten too close," he warned them. "You're in the snail's range now. Fall back."

The transport's comms relayed the same orders to Akira and sent him a map of the area, with the multigun snail's radius of fire highlighted in red. He swerved to escape the indicated area.

Alpha, can you see where it's firing from?

Over there. Alpha pointed ahead of them, and Akira followed her finger with his eyes. She augmented his vision to mark the location in question, and after she magnified his sight several times, he could finally see the snail amid the distant ruins before him.

So that's the multigun snail. Wait, what? Its cannon's moving! As the behemoth clung to the skyscraper, the large ordnance protruding from its shell swiveled in Akira's direction.

Not a moment later, a ray of light erupted from the gun. Akira's magnified vision was engulfed in blinding white—and a beat later, the light struck the desolate ground nearby. The high-powered energy beam then raced along the ground, incinerating everything in its path and leaving a trail of explosions in its wake. As Akira's truck jolted from the shock

waves, he was struck dumb with astonishment at the sheer power of the attack.

Alpha calmly instructed him on his next move. *Looks like it would be best to get a bit farther away. Back off more from the red zone.*

R-Right. Akira made a sharp turn, grimacing at the disastrous state of the incinerated, smoldering earth. *Wh-What* was *that, anyway?*

Enemy fire.

No, I get that much.

It's called a laser cannon. As I explained a bit back at the Yonozuka Ruins, "laser" is just a nickname, since it's not like it can actually fire at the speed of light. It's actually a high-powered, focused energy beam that reacts to the colorless fog in the air and—

No, that's not what I mean either.

It was a beam fired from the bounty monster known as the multigun snail, which likely increased the power of the beam by absorbing energy from the building it's clinging to. If it hits you, there won't be anything left. But it seems like it has trouble aiming accurately, so as long as you don't enter the red zone, you should be fine. Alpha grinned as if to ask, "There, satisfied?"

G-Good to know. Thank you for the information, Akira responded stiffly.

You're very welcome, she replied smugly.

Akira approached the ruins, cautious to not enter the red area under any circumstances. He'd broken out in a cold sweat earlier when he'd seen the power of the snail's laser cannon, but now that Alpha had assured him he'd be okay, he had regained his calm.

The tankrantula's bounty was eight hundred million. What's the multigun snail's?

One and a half billion.

One and a half billion... So this thing's supposed to be twice as strong as the tankrantula? With that shot from the laser cannon just now, I believe it.

The size of a bounty doesn't always correlate to a monster's strength, Akira. It only reflects how strongly the transport companies want to get rid of the monster.

No one knew precisely how far the snail's laser cannon could reach, but it seemed reasonable to conclude that its range was rather long, though its damage did drop off over distance. Even a beam fired from outside a

transport's scanner range would be plenty strong enough to obliterate the vehicle. Letting a monster like that roam around would severely hamper transporting and distribution throughout the wasteland. The bigwigs of the affected companies had probably increased the amount to that size to entice hunters to deal with the monster as quickly as possible, meaning it wasn't strong so much as it was a nuisance.

But well, we're only auxiliaries this time, Alpha added, *so there's no need to go all out like we did with the tankrantula to begin with. So you're not really in any danger anyway. You'll be fine.*

I see. That made sense to Akira. Sighing with relief, he put the pedal to the metal.

◆

Upon arriving at the Minakado Ruins, Akira and the rest of the team began their fight against the multigun snail, under Kurosawa's command. The battle had already begun, so Shikarabe's group was joining in midway. They were only auxiliaries this time, but it was still a bounty hunt. Fired up all over again, Akira charged into battle.

But his enthusiasm turned out to be wasted. In the end, Akira never got to fire a single shot at the snail. He and the rest of the auxiliary team were ordered to keep the path clear for the other hunters instead. A large-scale fight with a bounty monster was sure to draw other beasts in the area, and the auxiliaries' job was to exterminate them so the rest of the hunters could move freely. If a monster was large enough to block one's path, they could just drive it off with a vehicle or powered suit. For the smaller ones, it was enough to throw them inside one of the nearby buildings where they wouldn't get in the main force's way, if there were too many to kill them all. All the while, the hunters constantly received updated data on the snail's range of fire as it changed locations, and made sure not to enter those areas. Before long, the monster was taken down, and Akira felt that it had been a disappointingly easy fight, considering the snail had been designated as a bounty monster.

◆

During the battle, Kurosawa's strategy as a commander had been to prioritize safety, and he'd been thorough. First, he'd purchased information from the hunters who'd previously gone up against the monster and failed. Then he'd devised detailed, effective countermeasures by observing the target from a distance, and only put his plans into action once he was certain they would lead to a victory with no casualties.

His first measure against the snail, who over the course of multiple battles with hunters had nearly lost all of its artillery, was to have his team concentrate their fire on the guns it had left, rendering them completely unusable. Next, one unit—kitted out with gear specifically made to defend against laser cannon blasts—focused its fire on the main weapon, each hunter taking positions where the beam couldn't hit them.

As the commander, Kurosawa had been constantly checking the information the scouting team sent him and, after determining the enemy's radius of fire, issuing individual orders to everyone on the team. He ordered Shikarabe's auxiliary force, who had entered the fight partway through and had no protection against the laser cannon, to avoid that radius at all costs.

Against careful strategies and an airtight chain of command, all the monster's options were eventually sealed. Except for its main cannon, all of its guns had been destroyed, so it could no longer deliver precise attacks. Even when it fired the large gun and blasted down one of the nearby buildings in the ruins, Kurosawa had already planned an escape route for his team. And because Akira and the rest were keeping the roads clear, the main force didn't have to worry about any unlucky encounters with other monsters as they moved. They were able to retreat from the building's collapse without issue and stage a counterattack.

He'd prepared plenty of hunters to go on the offensive, as well as an abundance of ammo, so they had a surplus of firepower. The snail had moved to a defensive stance and created a force field with the energy absorbed from the building, but the combined firepower of a ton of artillery shells, a hail of gunfire, and a deluge of missiles pierced its defenses. The snail was shot down from the sides of three separate buildings, sometimes getting blasted off as it tried to flee all over the ruins; but the fourth time, it fell for good, and the impact from the fall shattered its enormous shell. Then the hunters fired at its exposed insides for the coup de grâce, and as the snail's guts scattered everywhere, it finally perished. The bounty

monster was defeated.

◆

Once the multigun snail was down for the count, Akira and the rest of his team went on standby again until the Hunter Office representatives could arrive. Sitting in the driver's seat of his truck, Akira gave a small sigh.

Well, that was anticlimactic.

Alpha wore her usual calm and cheerful look. *I know. We basically had nothing to do during that last part, did we?*

In fact, once all the monsters in the area had been taken care of, their only other job had been to avoid the range of the enemy's fire. Shikarabe and his comrades had joined in with their guided missile launchers, setting the guidance system to target the snail's coordinates, but Akira had been relegated to surveying the surrounding area—and in truth, he had left that mostly to Alpha, so he'd been quite bored.

He wasn't exactly unsatisfied, since they had indeed emerged victorious, but it had been a very different fight from the one with the tankrantula, and he vaguely felt like he'd wanted more of a challenge.

A short distance away from Akira, Kurosawa was chatting with Shikarabe. He cast a single furtive glance in Akira's direction before his eyes returned to Shikarabe, giving him a meaningful look. "Wow, so that's how the tankrantula fight went down, huh? Sounds tough. By the way, that kid over there—is that Togami? The 'rising star of Katsuya's detractors,' was it?"

Shikarabe grinned wryly. Kurosawa clearly already knew that the boy wasn't Togami, but had asked anyway. "Well, he is for now."

"Then we'll go with that for the time being. He certainly doesn't look like anything special, though. Is that really gonna work?"

"It's fine. It's not like I'm seriously planning to get him involved. As long as rumors spread and people get the wrong idea, I'm satisfied." Shikarabe gave the other hunter a knowing grin. "Actually, Kurosawa, don't you think he's perfect in that regard? He looks unassuming at a glance, but he's the real deal. You ought to have noticed that as the commander of the

battle just now."

"Well, I suppose so..."

"But the ones who weren't on the field aren't gonna be able to tell. No one will guess that Akira was responsible for all his accomplishments."

Kurosawa deduced what Shikarabe was getting at and gave a half smile. "So since those accomplishments aren't connected to anyone, they'll be attributed to the most likely of the official participants, right?"

"Exactly."

A cheap trick, indeed. Both Shikarabe and Kurosawa recognized it as such and exchanged wry smiles. But Shikarabe had been given no other choice. The situation at Druncam—Shikarabe's current syndicate and Kurosawa's former—had deteriorated so much that he'd been forced to stoop this low. The faces of the two veterans reflected their complicated feelings on this matter.

Then Kurosawa had an idea. "Hey, Shikarabe. You mind if I talk to him a bit? I want to make sure we're all on the same page."

"Fine, but if you say anything weird and piss him off, you're on your own."

"I know, I know." With that, Kurosawa headed toward Akira, his interest piqued, and Shikarabe trailed close behind.

While Shikarabe was introducing him to Akira, Kurosawa took another look at the boy from close up and groaned inwardly. He already knew Akira was skilled—he'd heard the details of the tankrantula fight from Shikarabe and seen for himself how precisely Akira had followed his own orders.

But data from elsewhere, like the information on the tankrantula battle, could only serve Kurosawa up to a point, as it didn't include his own impressions. And his personal evaluation so far was only based on how well Akira had obeyed him.

As a commander, Kurosawa was able to form objective opinions of others based on secondhand information—and normally, there was little difference between his assessment based on data and what his intuition told him. But as he continued to observe Akira up close, Kurosawa felt taken aback.

Hmm. Even if I know that he's more skilled than he looks, he doesn't appear any more capable than any other novice hunter I've seen. He stared

at the boy some more. *Akira's the opposite of* him*, in other words*. Another young hunter had come to his mind—someone who was completely different from Akira, but whose objective performance also didn't match the subjective impression he gave.

At that moment, Akira—knowing Kurosawa had been the commanding officer for the multigun snail operation—inquired, "Hey, can I ask you something? How much do you think expenses for this fight will turn out to be?"

"Hm? Roughly around a billion, I'd suspect."

"A *billion*...?" Akira looked incredulous, his mouth twitching. The snail's bounty was valued at one and a half billion, so they'd still be in the black if that estimate was accurate. But Akira knew it was too soon to celebrate.

Kurosawa knew what he was getting at and grinned. "It's true—with that much overhead and dividing the remaining amount among everyone, your individual payout probably won't be that much. So I get why you might think it won't be worth it." Having laid that groundwork, Kurosawa then gave a small shake of his head. "But consider this—most hunters who aim to get rich off bounties by trying to cut preparation costs end up dead. I don't want to die. So I'm willing to splurge if it means we'll live to fight another day."

Kurosawa was an exceptional hunter and an outstanding commander, but people often derided his emphasis on safety as cowardice. And there had indeed been times when he'd been relic hunting, judged a situation too pessimistically, and immediately retreated—when in fact he could've hit the jackpot if he'd only pressed forward a bit more.

But by that same token, the survival rate for those under Kurosawa was exceedingly high. While playing it safe was a far cry from the hunter's fantasy of exploring undiscovered ruins and striking it rich, in the long run it was more profitable to have a bit more caution and keep everyone alive. Even in the multigun snail battle, not only had no one died, they'd barely even suffered any severe injuries.

"The hunter profession is already dangerous enough," he added. "You never know when you're going to run into a surprise. With that in mind, it's best to take the safest path, the one leading to the fewest casualties, even if it's as simple as ganging up on the monster in numbers."

Kurosawa's strategy—the approach that had brought down the snail—was, in a way, no more nuanced than crushing the enemy with sheer firepower. It was the complete opposite of the typical hero's tale of taking on challenging monsters with nothing backing you up but luck and pure skill. It wasn't anything to be proud of. Even so, that was fine with Kurosawa. Those who risked their lives constantly in the pursuit of glory were free to do what they wanted, but he wanted no part of that.

"Well, a win's a win all the same," Kurosawa concluded. "Either way, we get recorded as those who succeeded in taking down the bounty. If we use that notoriety well, it'll be useful in all sorts of ways for our future hunter endeavors. And if we obtain some bragging rights on top of that, then what's to complain about?" Then he turned a knowing gaze to Shikarabe. "You crushed that tankrantula with only the four of you, right? That must've been tough."

"Well, it wasn't easy. But all four of us survived, so all's well that ends well."

Actually, five of the auxiliary hunters had died. But since only the Druncam hunters had been listed as participants, on paper there were no casualties.

"Impressive! That's certainly remarkable, but it must've been that much tougher to keep everyone alive. I assume you made a tidy profit, though?"

Kurosawa grinned knowingly again. Since he was fully aware that it hadn't just been the four of them, and that Shikarabe's ploy had made things needlessly complicated, he was effectively asking Shikarabe whether it had all been worth it in the end.

Shikarabe grinned ruefully. "Well, more or less."

"That so? Well, you're free to jump into trouble of your own accord if you want, but try to keep it in moderation, okay?" Kurosawa was giving his friend a light warning that if he hadn't employed that cheap trick, he would've had a slightly easier time.

After Kurosawa finished his chat with Shikarabe, Akira looked a bit uneasy now that he knew how much the multigun snail operation had cost.

"Hey Shikarabe, we made a profit on the tankrantula fight too, right? So how much do you think I'll be getting?"

The veteran hesitated. "The bounty reward has to go through Druncam's

account processing first, so it'll take some time before you're paid. Tally up your expenses before then and send them to me. The exact amount will be decided afterward."

"Okay."

Both of them walked away from that conversation feeling anxious and uneasy.

◆

Kurosawa returned to his own military transport, which had served as the command vehicle for the earlier operation. When he entered, a boy called out to him—not part of his force, but someone traveling with him all the same.

"Excuse me, Kurosawa, do you mind if I pick your brain about the command tactics you used against the multigun snail—?"

Kurosawa glanced at the boy and, rather than say the many things he was thinking, answered professionally and in no uncertain terms. "Yes, I mind."

"Huh?"

"Since the job came from Druncam," Kurosawa explained, "I allowed you to travel with my team and ride in the command vehicle. I gave you permission to look at the battle logs and even take them with you. But I refuse to become your teacher. So I won't answer your questions."

"U-Uh..."

"And you might be thinking because I'm not your teacher, why can't I just give you some general, informal advice—not from the position of commander? But if anything I say leads you astray when you're leading your own unit, I'm gonna get an earful from your superior, and I'd rather not be held responsible. So sorry, Katsuya, but I won't be giving you any advice at all."

"O-Oh, is that so...? Okay, I understand," Katsuya replied. To get the young hunter familiar with leading a large-scale force against a bounty monster, Mizuha had hired Kurosawa to let the boy shadow him. Even though it was a job from an organization he'd already left, he couldn't complain about the amount she'd offered, and a job was a job, so he'd ended up accepting.

“Just take it easy in the vehicle until we get back to the city. You’re a hunter too, so you probably don’t like being treated like a guest, but the job also stipulated that I bring you back home safe,” Kurosawa told him consolingly, then added he had things that needed taking care of, using his job as commander as an excuse to end the conversation.

But as he worked, he glanced at the boy from the corner of his eye. *Yep, he’s the exact opposite of the other kid.*

It wasn’t like Katsuya didn’t have any talent. On the contrary, he was plenty skilled, and Kurosawa could tell he had the potential to be a great hunter in the future. Both his subjective and objective assessments were in agreement there.

But if you were to ask Kurosawa whether or not Katsuya had the talent for commanding a big group, his judgment based on his intuition and his judgment based on data offered completely different answers. His gut told him that Katsuya had plenty of potential to be a good commander—but Kurosawa wasn’t so naive as to trust his gut. As a skilled commander, he’d trained himself to look at everything impartially. His MO was to gather enough information from a wide variety of sources and sufficiently analyze all the data he could to lead his team to victory. He took special care not to take the unnecessary risks that came from gambling on uncertain factors like intuition.

His prodigious ability to look at everything objectively told Kurosawa that at Katsuya’s current level, he’d be an average commander at best. In fact, based on information Kurosawa had previously acquired and the fact that Katsuya had actually had to ask him for pointers on leading, the ex-Druncam hunter had to conclude that the boy would be a lousy leader for a large force.

Kurosawa had never experienced such a disparity between his intuition and his impartial analysis in his entire life. It made him feel more uneasy than surprised, and he glanced warily at Katsuya once more.

But he was now able to lay another fear he’d had to rest, and his expression relaxed into a small smile. *Well, at least the reason Shikarabe and the others decided to join so suddenly had nothing to do with him. I suppose I should just be grateful for that right now.* In other words, Shikarabe hadn’t been trying to boost Katsuya’s achievements by participating with an unlisted member—it had just been a coincidence.

Even though Kurosawa had long since left Druncam, he was relieved that one of his former comrades hadn't become someone who'd go that far for a mere internal squabble, or who would put more effort into gaining the advantage in a factional dispute than into their actual job as a hunter.

◆

The second bounty hunt for the day was over, and Akira had finally returned home. Now the boy was soaking his tiredness away in the bath.

"Hey Alpha, can you calculate my expenses for me? Please don't say I have to do it on my own as part of my studies—I'm absolutely exhausted. Cut me some slack this time."

I understand. Leave it to me and get some rest.

"Thanks... You're a lifesaver..." Feeling his consciousness dissolve into the hot water, he thought back on the day's battles—they'd been polar opposites of each other, yet each had left deep impressions on his psyche. The tankrantula had been a tough fight, while taking down the multigun snail had been so boring that he'd found himself questioning his decision to become a hunter. Then a different thought occurred to him. "Wait, there's a couple more bounty monsters out there, right? With even higher bounties than these two?"

That's right. So the ones you fought today were the weakest of the bunch.

He sighed deeply—this was unwelcome news. "Of course." They'd been so strong and yet the easiest of the four.

But Alpha added, *And just to let you know, when you go farther east, monsters of that level are pretty common.*

"R-Really?"

Really. As well as creatures powerful enough to eat those monsters for breakfast. These ones aren't even recognized as bounty monsters there since they're so prevalent.

Akira tried to imagine this terrifying landscape. "The world's way bigger than I thought," he mused. Following his escape from the back alleys of the slums, Akira's universe had expanded dramatically. Yet many more opportunities were coming his way to broaden his horizons even further.

Chapter 96: Katsuya's Battalion

A group of hunters made camp on the outskirts of the wasteland, preparing to hunt the remaining bounties. Their mark this time was the hypersynthetic snake, worth two billion aurum.

A number of armored cars and desert utility trucks lined the camp, with the armored military transport that served as a command vehicle in the center. No run-of-the-mill hunter would ever be able to afford these high performance products, which showed just how much money had been poured into taking down this particular target.

Young hunters were scattered here and there, gleefully preparing for the operation. They were all pro-Katsuya rookies from Druncam—here to make up the main force, led by Katsuya himself.

Elena and Sara's car was parked a short distance away from the main force. Sara was leaning against the truck, observing how the unit was operating.

"I know there's strength in numbers, but they're all so young," she said. "I don't want to discount them just because of their age, but with this many inexperienced rookies I can't help but feel anxious, you know? You think they'll be okay, Elena?"

Typically, the longer one worked as a hunter, the harder it became to tell their actual age. As a result of frequently consuming powerful medicine, the repeated regeneration of their cells curtailed the natural aging process and kept the body from deteriorating. Furthermore, in the course of their careers, some hunters ended up swapping out their original body parts for mechanical ones, while others became full-blown cyborgs and eliminated the signs of aging altogether. And the longer one continued their career as a hunter, the more accessible such options became.

Even so, most experienced hunters possessed adult bodies—after all, most of the gear made for hunters was designed and manufactured with adults in mind, and children had no business handling such dangerous equipment in any case. Very few hunters would deliberately choose to look

like children unless they preferred that appearance.

So most hunters who looked underage were genuinely just as young as they appeared. If they seemed like kids, it was reasonable to assume that they'd probably only been hunters for a short time and lacked experience. (This was also one reason fledgling hunters tended to get looked down upon.)

Sara also didn't think the Druncam rookies looked very strong. At least, they didn't seem like they'd be capable enough to participate in a hunt this tough.

Elena, on the other hand, had accepted their current commission, and she offered a light defense of the tyros. "Well, considering their unit's size and how good their equipment is, I wouldn't count them out just yet. At least, it's clear the syndicate's put some money into making this hunt succeed. Enough, in fact, that I'm beginning to worry we're not going to turn a profit even if the hunt's successful."

"Hmm. But isn't this monster worth two billion aurum? If its bounty is that high, I doubt high-grade equipment and numbers alone are gonna cut it," Sara said, a bit concerned.

Elena just grinned. "What do you mean? Isn't that exactly why they hired us, a couple of hunters from outside the syndicate, to provide support?"

Druncam had indeed enlisted Elena and Sara to support the rookies during this venture. Unlike Akira, who'd been hired by Shikarabe as an unofficial participant, this was a legitimate job that had been processed through the Hunter Office. However, the job description had been unusually vague—they were merely to "provide support during an operation." This was so when the job's completion was documented in the Office database, Druncam could freely adjust how actively the support teams had allegedly participated.

Naturally, the ideal outcome for the desk jockeys would be for Katsuya's force to take down the hypersynthetic snake all by themselves. However, if that proved impossible, they had Elena and Sara on hand to provide additional assistance. The official record would state that the main force had been perfectly capable of taking out the target on their own, but that they'd had support personnel on standby just to err on the side of caution.

Either way, Elena and Sara's names would be absent from the list of

those who'd successfully taken down the snake, since they were only support personnel.

"Oh, *right*, I forgot," Sara said with a sarcastic half smile. "In other words, we're to defend the main force from harm—or more bluntly, be their babysitters and hold their hands throughout the whole battle."

"Oh come on, that's a bit harsh! It's not like that was explicitly stated in the job description—our contract just says our pay will be determined by how many in the main unit survive. Jeez, could they make it any more obvious?" Elena and Sara's contract stipulated that even if they severely wounded the bounty monster, they wouldn't receive a single additional aurum. Furthermore, the more damage the main unit suffered, the larger the deduction from the women's pay. Even if Druncam hadn't expressly come out and said that the pair's job was to protect the main force from injury, it was crystal clear what the syndicate expected of them.

Another truck appeared, pulling up next to Elena and Sara's. The door opened, and a boy wearing a powered suit got out. Elena and Sara greeted him with bows.

"Sorry I'm late," he said.

"No problem," Elena replied cheerfully. "We were the ones who invited you on such short notice, after all." She gave the boy a once-over. "Um, this might sound weird coming from the one who hired you, but are you sure you're up to this? If not, you don't have to force yourself. If I forced you to join this hunt while you were exhausted and not up to par, Shizuka would never let me hear the end of it."

"I'm fine," the boy said. "Don't worry. I'm in tip-top shape."

Elena had mentioned Shizuka to keep the boy honest and make sure he really was up to the task. But seeing his confident smile even after hearing her friend's name, she nodded, satisfied.

Sara grinned with anticipation. "Pleasure working with you again today, Akira."

"The pleasure's all mine. Nice working with you again too, Sara."

Teaming up with Elena and Sara, Akira stood poised to undertake his third bounty hunt.

◆

In the command vehicle, Mizuha felt almost ready to tear her hair out. Before her, a young Druncam rookie named Lily was shouting in anger.

"This is *ridiculous*! Why do we need any hunters besides us to come along?! Are you saying you don't have faith in Katsuya?!"

"I never said anything like that. Naturally, I believe in Katsuya's ability just as much as you do. In fact, I have faith in all of you. Otherwise, I wouldn't have made you the main unit. You understand that, right?"

"No, I *don't* understand! If that's true, then we ought to be enough! Tell those extras to pack their bags and go home right now!"

"You know I can't do that—"

"Why not?! The Group B rookies are finally starting to see Katsuya's greatness for themselves, so if it was them, I wouldn't mind so much. But non-Druncam hunters are obviously just gonna try and hog all the glory!"

While they weren't developed enough yet to be called factions, divisions had begun to form even among the rookies who supported Katsuya, some of whom were bigger fans of Katsuya than others. One group treated Katsuya like a hero, putting far too much stock in his competency, and by extension overestimating their own as well.

Lily obviously belonged to that crowd. To her, Katsuya was amazing, and that made her and the rest of her comrades amazing too. Although she didn't realize it, to a certain degree she saw herself and Katsuya as one and the same.

On the surface, Mizuha was trying to console Lily—but inwardly, the Druncam administrator sighed in exasperation. "I'm sure you've heard that due to unforeseen circumstances, Katsuya ran into some trouble during the Yonozuka operation," she said. "Don't you agree that it's better to have some backup on standby to keep that from happening again?"

"Conditions there were irregular! Normally that never would've happened! Don't try to make an anomaly the standard! Then we'll have to be chaperoned every time we go on a hunt, and we'll never be able to prove ourselves!"

"Yes, but—"

"And besides, Katsuya even overcame all of *that* adversity on his own! Clearly you just don't understand how incredible he is!"

"You say 'on his own,' but according to the report, if another hunter who just happened to be in the area hadn't rescued him, it would've turned out

badly for him."

"Katsuya was just being humble, duh! I bet it was actually the reverse—he rescued the other hunter from danger! Mizuha, you're not saying that you think Katsuya's weak enough to have to be rescued by someone else, are you?!"

"I'm not saying that at all." As someone who had a lot riding on Katsuya—and who had herself bragged about his skill to the sponsors—she couldn't say anything that might imply she thought Katsuya's abilities weren't up to snuff. Realizing she wouldn't be able to get Lily off her back using Yonozuka as an example, she changed tack. "Well, to tell the truth, Katsuya told me he's not confident he'll be able to do a good job leading this unit. So in order to alleviate his worries, I hired additional—"

"That's a lie! The truth is that you think he can't handle it on his own! Seeing how raring to go Katsuya is right now, it's so obvious that you're lying! Besides, that contradicts what you said earlier! Didn't you tell us all that he was excited about leading the unit and confident we would win?!"

Mizuha fell silent. Back when Katsuya had been down in the dumps, she'd had to practically coerce Katsuya into agreeing to lead this hunt. In order to cover up Katsuya's unwillingness to take the helm, she'd announced to everyone that he was overjoyed about leading the operation and looking forward to the victory. And in order to make sure that lie wasn't exposed, she'd done everything she could to distance Katsuya from the rest of his unit.

But now that Katsuya had regained his spirit, that lie had essentially become the truth. It was too late for Mizuha to deny it now; no one would believe her at this point. Any outsider would think Mizuha had hired backup for this hunt against Katsuya's will. Mizuha understood that, and so was left at a total loss.

Right then, Katsuya—having just given a pep talk to his forces—returned to the command vehicle with Yumina and Airi.

"Mizuha, we've done our final checks and everything's a go. We're ready to head out whenever you are— Wait, why are you here, Lily? You should be at your assigned station." The moment he'd just reported that everyone was in position and they were ready to head out at any time, he'd discovered that one of his comrades had abandoned her post. He looked a bit embarrassed.

But Lily didn't seem to care as she strode over to him. "Katsuya! Why did you allow a support unit to come with us?! Are we that unreliable to you?!"

"Huh?! What're you talking about all of a sudden, Lily?!" Katsuya looked as though he was completely lost, so Mizuha brought him up to speed. When she finished, he nodded in understanding and smiled at Lily to console her. "You're exactly right, Lily. We're perfectly capable of taking down the target on our own!"

Overjoyed at Katsuya's support, Lily beamed. "Right?! So we should—"

But his next words made her face immediately cloud over.

"However, just in case it's a bit too dangerous or more than we can handle, don't you think it would be better to have Elena, Sara, and the other support units on standby? And Mizuha's gone out of her way to get them for us, so it would be a waste to just leave them behind. Now return to your station, okay, Lily?" With that, Katsuya considered the matter closed.

But Lily exploded in fury. "How can you spout such nonsense too, Katsuya?!"

Katsuya looked taken aback for a moment before his expression changed to one of confusion. "Nonsense? Did I say something strange, Yumina? Airi?"

"Nope."

"You did not."

"I didn't think so." He nodded, a bit relieved. Now that he'd confirmed Lily was the strange one here, he turned toward her, looking perplexed.

Lily's face contorted when she saw how Katsuya was treating her, and she glared daggers at Yumina and Airi as if to vent her frustration and anger on them. "It's because *you* two are always agreeing with him," she growled.

While Katsuya remained nonplussed at Lily's attitude, Mizuha came to a decision. "Katsuya, before we begin the operation, go ahead and say hi to Elena and Sara real quick."

"Huh? Can I?" Even though they were his acquaintances, the pair would only be taking a back seat role once the operation began. Mizuha had been worried that since he was the commander of the unit, going to greet them might be seen as giving them preferential treatment and might cause discord within his ranks. So she'd told Katsuya to leave them alone.

But now Mizuha took back her words with a smile. "I've changed my

mind. If it'll pump you up for the battle ahead, then I suppose I can field a few complaints from the other support personnel. After all, your morale takes top priority for me."

Katsuya grinned. "Thank you, Mizuha!"

"Don't mention it. Now then, I'm going to take Lily back to her post, and then I'll be heading back to the city. I trust this unit is in good hands, Commander Katsuya?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

At Katsuya's spirited reply, Mizuha smiled in satisfaction. Then she grew serious. "Follow me, Lily."

"Hey, wait! I'm not finished!" Lily protested in anger.

But Mizuha cut her off, her tone this time befitting a Druncam administrator. "*Now.* Fail to comply with my orders, and I'll take you off the operation. Katsuya may be your commander, but I'm your boss. Don't forget that."

With no choice but to obey, Lily followed her out of the vehicle without a word.

◆

Mizuha led her to a small car parked beside the armored military transport. The moment they got in, Mizuha's attitude did a one-eighty.

"Sorry for the strictness back there, Lily," she said. "Druncam's administrative offices provided that vehicle we were in just now, and there are all sorts of devices in there—you never know who might be listening in. I'm an admin too, so I couldn't say anything in there that might not look good on the record. But this is my personal car, so we can speak freely now."

Such sudden friendliness from Mizuha surprised Lily so much that she forgot her earlier discontent. Seeing the look of confusion on the girl's face, Mizuha kept talking before Lily could get a thought in edgewise.

"Look, I get why you were unhappy back there. You want Katsuya to act more like a—how should I put it—reliable leader, I suppose? You want him to be like, 'Leave everything to me! All you gotta do is shut up and follow my orders!' Right?"

Lily reflexively nodded.

Mizuha continued, “It feels wrong for him to want to rely on outside help all of a sudden, because that makes him seem unconfident, like he thinks you guys need the support of other hunters to win. Do I have that right?”

“Th-That’s it exactly! And yet you hired them anyway—!” Lily began, but Mizuha pacified her anger with a smile.

“I get it, I really do. But I can’t just ignore our sponsors’ opinions. They graciously gave us financial backing to hire support, so we had to use it. The more people present during the operation, the more money they’re going to think we spent on the hunt, but that doesn’t mean we *have* to spend that much—*if* you guys perform well, that is.”

“R-Really?”

“Yes, really. The support team’s pay is dependent on how much help they offer. In other words, if you guys go in there and knock that monster dead all by yourselves, we won’t have to pay them hardly anything—they’ll basically just be dummies whose only purpose is to pad the number of participants. When the sponsors see how little we spent, they’ll realize such support is unnecessary, and eventually they’ll even refuse to waste their money on something so frivolous. But that’s all dependent on how you guys do, so I’m counting on you and the rest of the unit to make it happen, okay?”

“Leave it to us, Mizuha! It’ll be a piece of cake with Katsuya leading us!”

Seeing that Lily’s spirits were sufficiently raised, Mizuha moved in to burst her bubble. “Well, Katsuya will be fine, I’m sure, but I wonder if Katsuya thinks *you* all will be fine.”

Her good spirits suddenly ruined again, Lily unconsciously raised her voice in anger once more. “What?! Are you saying that Katsuya thinks we’re dead weight?!”

“That’s a rather negative way of putting it, but in broad terms, yes.” As Lily grew even more furious, Mizuha explained. Back when Katsuya had still required supervision, he’d flaunted his skill, asserting he didn’t need anyone looking after him except for his friends Yumina and Airi. Even when he’d no longer had a chaperone, he’d only teamed up with rookies, silencing the veterans who looked down on him and his comrades through his sheer competency alone.

But now he'd accepted a team of supporting hunters, who more or less served as glorified bodyguards. What had changed his mind? Mizuha suggested that this time he had too many comrades—in other words, people like Lily. No matter how skilled Katsuya was, even he couldn't protect everyone in a group this size—plus he'd already let people die on his watch at Yonozuka. So he'd given in and accepted having support to make sure that didn't happen again.

Hearing Mizuha's account, Lily was aghast. "N-No way! You're lying—Katsuya would never say that!"

"You're right—he'd never come out and say it. But subconsciously, that's likely what he's thinking. And even if he was consciously aware of it, Katsuya would never come out and tell you directly that you're dragging him down. Even as he tried to keep you all alive, he just wouldn't say a word."

Lily knew this was true and fell silent.

Then Mizuha adopted a gentler tone. "Of course, that's just what Katsuya's thinking right now. Which means there's still time to show Katsuya your true potential and get him to revise his opinion of you. And don't you agree that this bounty hunt would be the perfect opportunity?" Mizuha's tantalizing words seeped into Lily's heart. "Katsuya's the commander, but Yumina and Airi are vice-commanders. And they only got those positions because of how long they've been friends with Katsuya. Some of the rookies are upset by that but won't voice their complaints—because what Katsuya says, goes."

Lily was one of those rookies. Now that the young girl's complaints, which she had suppressed, had been dug up once more, she was brimming with hope and anticipation at Mizuha's next words.

"But with those two being so close to Katsuya, he's had plenty of opportunities to see how capable they are. He recognizes their strength, and he wouldn't appoint them vice-commanders if he didn't think they could pull their own weight. However, if someone else were to show him they were just as capable, he might very well see them in a new light. So what do you say? If you'd like, I'll outfit you with brand-new gear and give you a new station to make it easier for you to show Katsuya what you're truly capable of." Mizuha gave Lily a smile, already knowing what her answer would be.

“Yes, please!”

“Understood.” Mizuha pulled out her terminal and made good on her offer.

◆

As Akira idly chatted with Elena and Sara, he was also observing the main unit. Suddenly, something caught his eye—a large armored car parked before him, with a large cannon mounted on top that had clearly not been part of its original design. Something about this weapon seemed eerily familiar.

Alpha, correct me if I’m wrong, or mistaken, or hallucinating, but haven’t I seen that cannon before?

You’re not mistaken. I’ve also seen it previously.

No kidding? So it really is the same!

Indeed, it was the giant laser cannon the multigun snail had once carried on its back. Now it sat atop a turret, forcibly affixed to the roof of the car so that it could no longer swivel. The only way to change the cannon’s trajectory would be to turn the vehicle.

They’re really gonna fire that thing?

Well, there’d be no point to bluffs or intimidation tactics against a monster. So yes, I’d say they intend to fire it.

They’re really gonna fire it...

But I suspect it won’t pack the same punch as when it was attached to the snail. Even if they stuffed as many generators in the car as it could hold, the blast would be considerably weaker.

Well, yeah, that makes sense. Akira relaxed a bit when he heard this. Even so, he couldn’t help but recall the awe-inspiring power of the multigun snail’s main cannon, and he winced.

The command vehicle approached the place where Elena, Sara, and Akira were waiting, and parked nearby. Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi emerged.

Elena waved happily. “Greetings, Commander Katsuya. About time to start the operation, I take it?”

“That’s right. I know you’ll officially be taking orders from me today, but please watch my back all the same—” He spotted Akira out of the

corner of his eye. “Huh?” The unexpected presence caught him off guard—then his expression grew wary as he faced the other boy.

“Why are *you* here?”

“’Cause Elena and Sara hired me.”

Clearly, neither of them were interested in deepening their relationship.

Katsuya looked baffled. “Um, Elena, as part of my duties as commander, I took a look at the list of support personnel, and I’m pretty certain his name wasn’t on the list.”

“Right, it wasn’t. That’s because he’s not under a Druncam contract.”

Akira had only been hired by Elena and Sara, not Druncam. In other words, he technically wasn’t even support personnel, which meant that officially he wasn’t even participating in this hunt.

Some of the other support teams had done the same. This was all part of Mizuha’s plan to have as few support personnel officially documented as possible. On the surface, it merely looked like the support teams themselves had not been confident in their own skills and had needed to hire additional help, and by raising their pay Mizuha had indirectly communicated to them that she intended for them to employ outside assistance.

Without breaching confidentiality, Elena tried to subtly spell all this out to Katsuya. But when he still didn’t understand, Yumina offered a more direct explanation.

“Oh, so that’s how it is. I see now,” he said when he finally got it. Even so, he still had strong reservations about bringing Akira along. But he couldn’t give voice to those complaints—that would be rude toward Elena and Sara, since they’d been the ones to hire Akira. Besides, Katsuya had seen Akira in action at Yonozuka and knew that he was the real deal.

As much as it pained him, he allowed Akira’s participation, letting him off with only a stern look. There were all sorts of things Katsuya wanted to say to Akira—*We don’t need you. Don’t get in our way. Don’t drag us down. If you insist on coming, you better pull your own weight. Don’t cause trouble for Elena and Sara*—but since he didn’t want to offend Elena and Sara, he chose his words carefully. “Hey, you’d better not let Elena and Sara do all the work, okay?” he barked. “If you’re coming along, at least do your job.”

For his part, Akira would normally have responded, *Elena and Sara hired me, not you. I don’t take orders from you.* But he also held back—he

was under Elena and Sara's employ this time, and didn't want to trouble them by starting any unnecessary fights. So all he said was, "Understood. I'll do what I was hired for."

Seeing the bad blood between the two boys, Elena and Sara smiled awkwardly, unsure what to do. Inwardly, Yumina was also burying her head in her hands; but both she and Airi sensed the two boys were trying to avoid arguing with each other in front of Elena and Sara, and decided unnecessary mediation would only make the situation worse. Instead, they tried to get Katsuya to conclude his business as quickly as possible so they could leave before things went even further south.

"Katsuya, now's a good time to give Akira his medicine back, don't you think?" Yumina suggested. "You've said hi to Elena and Sara, and there's not much else to do here, so hand it over and let's head back."

"Huh? O-Oh, right." Katsuya tossed the medicine Mizuha had given him over to Akira without saying a word to the other boy.

Akira caught it, and after a moment's thought, tossed it back over to Yumina. Yumina was nonplussed.

Katsuya eyed Akira suspiciously. "What's the big idea?"

"If you want to give it back, do so when the hunt's over."

A bystander would have probably had a hard time determining what he meant. Was he worried, thinking they should have it on hand in case they got hurt, or was he provoking them by insinuating they'd definitely end up needing meds strong enough to cost two million aurum a box?

For Akira, the meaning was actually the former option—that was why he'd passed it to Yumina instead. Yumina correctly interpreted it as such, but Katsuya, thanks to his bad relationship with Akira, automatically assumed the latter interpretation.

Yumina sensed this, saw a confrontation looming on the horizon, and quickly interjected. "Sure, Akira. You'll get this back after the hunt, don't worry. Elena, Sara, we'll be counting on you for support. Come on, Katsuya, let's head back." With a quick bow to the women, she dragged Katsuya toward the transport.

"Y-Yumina, stop! W-Well, I'll be taking my leave then. Bye, you two." He also managed a bow to Elena and Sara before being shoved into the vehicle. Airi was the last to bow, right before ducking into the transport behind them.

Affecting nonchalance, Sara probed Akira about his relationship with Katsuya. “You two have a history, I take it?”

Akira nodded. “Basically, yeah.” But he didn’t divulge any details.

Elena wasn’t sure whether he didn’t want to talk about it or was just being his usual taciturn self. Curious, she took over from Sara and pressed him further. “If you don’t mind, can you tell us what happened?”

Akira hesitated before speaking. “Sorry. I don’t think you should hear that story from me. Ask Yumina about it if you get the chance.” This was his way of showing consideration to Yumina, who was firmly in Katsuya’s camp. If she wanted to tell them honestly, she could; if she’d rather talk her way out of it, she was free to do that as well.

“I see. We might do that, then,” Elena said, her tone deliberately cheerful.

Sara gave a small smile but looked conflicted. “Well, that’s neither here nor there, is it?” she finally said. “We hired you, so we expect you to work all the same, regardless of the circumstances.”

Catching her hidden meaning—that he wasn’t to let his personal feelings toward Katsuya get in the way of work—Akira grinned and nodded. “Of course. I plan to.”

“Good! Let’s all work hard,” Elena said.

She and Sara were both pleased with Akira’s determined attitude. For the time being, that answer sufficed.

◆

Once the three Druncam rookies got back in the transport, Yumina heaved a sigh before fixing Katsuya with a stern glare.

“Listen, Katsuya. I’m not going to tell you to become Akira’s best friend or whatever, but can’t you put in just a bit more effort to get along with him? I know there’s bad blood or something between you two, but he did save our lives at Yonozuka—not once, but twice, in case you forgot.”

Yumina was seriously angry, and Katsuya flinched. Then his expression changed, reflecting the conflicted feelings in his heart.

“I know. I’m sorry,” he grumbled. “But I can’t help it. For some reason, it’s like we’re just not compatible at all.”

“If you know that already, then quit trying to provoke him. As long as

you don’t get on his bad side, he won’t get on yours. Probably.” Yumina passed Katsuya the medicine Akira had given her. As Katsuya looked confused, she delivered the final blow. “And if you don’t want to have to use this, you ought to start thinking more rationally and act like a commander should.”

Reading between the lines of Yumina’s advice—*Don’t just rush in like an idiot like you normally do, or your comrades will be in serious danger*—Katsuya smiled wryly. “Fine, fine, I get it! I’ll just sit in my chair and issue my orders. That satisfy you?”

Yumina smiled and nodded. “Yes, it does. Now then, Commander Katsuya, I believe it’s time we head out.”

“Agreed.” Katsuya then sent a transmission to everyone in the unit—his enthusiastic announcement that the hunt was on!

The vehicles belonging to the main force left the base one after another, led by the armored command transport and, in second position, the car with the gigantic laser cannon. Behind the Druncam group came the support personnel, who were free to decide their own formations and the order they traveled in.

Many people had their own private reasons for having joined the operation—but regardless, they were all ready now to hunt the hypersynthetic snake.

Chapter 97: The Hypersynthetic Snake

The battalion of hunters sped across the wasteland. The main group, led by Katsuya, was made up of his Druncam rookie fans. Their goal: to take down the bounty monster known as the hypersynthetic snake. The sight of numerous desert utility vehicles barreling along the desolate terrain resembled a large pack of monsters charging toward their prey.

Of course, the commotion drew the monsters in the area toward them, but the hunters eliminated the creatures without breaking a sweat—they intended to take down a monster with a bounty of two billion aurum on its head, so they'd be in trouble if they couldn't handle at least this much.

However, the main force Katsuya commanded was equipped to take down large, powerful monsters, not grunts. So it was actually the support personnel that was taking care of their uninvited guests.

Akira fired his CWH anti-materiel rifle, sending an armor-piercing bullet through the eyes of a carnivorous behemoth. The beast toppled over and died instantly.

Elena and Sara were riding a short distance away in their truck. Sara's voice came over the comms: "Excellent work! You've really come into your own as a hunter, Akira."

"Thanks!" He grinned. He'd lined up that particular shot without Alpha's help, so he was genuinely happy to be praised. "Say, are we just gonna be killing scrubs like these all day?"

"Essentially. Our job is to make sure that other monsters don't get in the way of the main unit as it launches a full-scale offensive against the bounty monster. I'm sure you're disappointed that the main unit gets to have all the fun, but them's the breaks this time, so just grin and bear it," Sara teased.

"You'll be rewarded handsomely for your patience, at least," Elena chimed in cheerfully. "We're the ones who hired you, so we'll make sure it's worth your while. With that in mind, if you do have any complaints, just let us know, and we'll see if we can work something out."

"No complaints from me," Akira replied. "I say, keep the easy jobs

coming!”

“I heard that your last job was when Shikarabe hired you to take down another bounty monster with his crew. Was that commission really so easy?” Sara sounded dubious.

“Um, well...” He trailed off. He’d been hired then unofficially, and Shikarabe had told him not to go blabbing to anyone. But he figured he could at least tell Elena and Sara how tough things had been without revealing anything significant. In fact, he reasoned, going out of his way to hide it would seem even more suspicious.

As Akira hemmed and hawed over how to respond, Elena sensed some extenuating circumstances from the silence on the other end and offered some help. “If you’re concerned about exposing the details of your arrangement with Shikarabe, don’t worry. He already filled us in when we hired you.”

While Akira was currently in the employ of Elena and Sara, they were technically only temporarily borrowing him from Shikarabe. When Elena had initially made her offer to Akira, the boy had replied that he’d love to take the job, but it might be difficult since he was still under contract with Shikarabe. Elena had then contacted Shikarabe and, after some negotiating, had come to an agreement.

Shikarabe had hesitated at first, but as he was already worried about not being able to pay Akira his share, he didn’t want to earn any more of his ire than necessary by selfishly denying him a job opportunity. Moreover, the thought of Akira—someone he’d hired himself—stealing the show when the desk jockeys wanted the rookies to have all the glory had greatly amused him.

In other words, it was partly due to Druncam’s factional dispute that Akira had been roped into joining his third hunt.

“You joined the tankrantula and multigun snail hunts as an unofficial auxiliary member, right? We already know that much. But if you’ve committed to secrecy for something else beyond that, we won’t force it out of you.”

“No, that’s basically the gist of it,” Akira replied, and proceeded to divulge the details of the two hunts.

Sara listened to Akira’s account of the events with great interest. “Wow, those two hunts were way different, huh?” she mused when he’d finished.

“Practically night and day, it seems,” Elena added. “To think you had such a hard time with an eight-hundred-thousand-aurum monster, while the one worth one and a half billion aurum went down with hardly a fight. Almost leaves you feeling disappointed, huh?”

At that moment, the comms came to life—the hypersynthetic snake had been spotted. A gigantic cloud of dust could be seen up ahead.

Sara told Elena to speed up so they could catch up with Akira, and once the two trucks were running parallel to each other, she called out to him with a huge grin, directly this time rather than through the wireless.

“Akira! That snake’s strong enough to be worth two billion aurum! I know the main unit’s supposed to take it down, but I suspect we’ll have an opportunity to get a few hits in as well! When that time comes, let’s do our best, okay?!”

“Roger!” Akira yelled back happily.

◆

The enormous snake was tall enough to rival a skyscraper at its full height. It slithered along as though it ruled the wasteland, destroying everything in its path. From far away, it seemed to move slowly, but that was only a trick of the eye due to its sheer size—in reality, it was moving at about the same speed as an automobile.

This serpent had grown even larger since emerging from the Yonozuka Ruins. After directing his forces to flank the target on both sides, Katsuya gave the order to attack, and as one the Druncam rookies fired their missile launchers.

Some of the rookies had exited their vehicles first, while others rode in open-air vehicles without roofs or doors and so didn’t have to. Still others had the doors of their trucks or cars open and were leaning out to get a good shot, or were riding in the truck beds of their large desert utility trucks, firing from the vertically opening doors on either side. A massive cluster of missiles sailed toward their target and struck the enemy directly.

The ensuing explosions incinerated the monster’s scales and even gouged the skin underneath, sending chunks of its body flying. The barrage engulfed every inch of its body, injuring it all over.

Yet the snake didn’t seem fazed. Its torso was as thick as a building, and

long enough to match—the chunks it had lost were negligible at best. Katsuya and his unit weren't surprised—they'd known from the start they would need to keep up a continuous assault to gradually chip away at its life until it perished.

The missiles the rookies fielded weren't able to home in on their targets very well, so the hunters couldn't use the same tactic Shikarabe's unit had during the tankrantula hunt. But the ordnance more than made up for their inaccuracy in sheer range and power, and they'd been cheap, so Druncam had purchased tons of bulk orders. Since the snake was so gargantuan, there was no need to aim precisely. All one had to do was point the launcher in the target's general direction and fire, and it was sure to hit. As long as they had enough ammunition, they could wear the monster down bit by bit.

Missiles flew one after another—some from handheld launchers, others from automatic ones mounted atop some of the vehicles—and struck the target all over its body. The monster could regenerate each damaged area, but the next barrage of missiles would hit before it had a chance to fully recover, and the snake's body was slowly but surely whittled away. Fragments of its skin littered the wasteland.

As they continued their offensive, Katsuya's unit maintained a fixed distance from the behemoth in order to keep it within range of their launchers. If the monster tried to retreat, they'd close in, and if it approached them, they'd fall back.

Now it was just a matter of whether they could finish the job before they ran out of ammo. The prognosis was good—they had plenty of firepower at their disposal, and they could always have the support personnel join the fight if necessary. And if even that wasn't enough, they could always give up on winning on their own and call in reinforcements from Druncam as a last resort.

Either way, the plan was watertight. Everyone was convinced that victory was assured.

◆

As Akira continued to observe the hypersynthetic snake, he felt surprised and exasperated—even after receiving salvo after salvo of missiles and being repeatedly engulfed in smoke and flame, the behemoth

snake's movements hadn't slowed one bit.

Any other monster would've already been killed by an assault like that. If it's still standing after all this, what are we gonna do? It's not invincible, right?

No. From this distance, it might look unscathed, but they're definitely hurting it. Not to mention it's expending all its energy trying to heal itself, so its body is seriously wearing down.

I see. So we're gonna win. Even though Akira didn't think he was accomplishing much, since his only contribution was picking off the monsters that the tumult of the battle had attracted, he breathed a sigh of relief. A small victory was still a victory nonetheless.

But Alpha's expression was grave. *Unfortunately, it's still too soon to celebrate.*

I know that much. "Don't let your guard down until the end," right?

Not just that. Look. Alpha gave Akira's vision a bird's-eye display of the surrounding area. Akira, Katsuya, and the other Druncam rookies' locations were marked with dots, but the snake's body was so enormous that its location had to be represented with a thick line. There were also dots indicating other monsters in the area, but they were sparse since the support personnel had already eliminated the lion's share. Akira watched as one more dot, representing a monster he'd just killed, disappeared from the map.

I don't see anything unusual, Akira wondered. Then the map in his vision expanded outward, until the thick line representing the hypersynthetic snake became small and thin. A giant mass of dots was slowly approaching from the edge of the map—an enormous number of monsters was swarming their way. He hadn't spotted them before Alpha had expanded the map because they had been outside the map's radius.

Akira reflexively grimaced, then realized something was off. *Wait a sec. What the hell? I know large battles typically attract monsters, but this is way too many, right?*

Indeed. I suspect the snake summoned them. Seeing his deepening confusion, Alpha elaborated further. The snake would have needed to consume tons of prey in order to reach its current size. Normally, it would be impossible to find that much sustenance by simply roaming the wasteland. Even if it spotted a sizable group of monsters, most would end

up fleeing before it could catch them. Therefore, the snake probably possessed some organ that made its prey come to it—similar to a threat magnet. That way, even if it was only able to eat a fraction of the monsters it encountered on the prowl, it could always find enough food.

And while, at a glance, it might have looked like the monster was moving around the wasteland without rhyme or reason, the creature was actually making a large circle, and had most likely been calling monsters from outside this area all the while. That way, it could eat enough to replenish its energy and heal the injuries it incurred from Katsuya's unit.

Akira realized that things were about to become a bit dicey. But at the same time, he was relieved—at least the incoming monsters weren't the snake's allies. This wouldn't be a repeat of what had happened during the tankrantula hunt—at worst, they'd just have an additional nuisance to contend with.

Alpha, I'll ask just in case: This incoming group of monsters is something we can handle, right? Even though we're just support personnel this time around, we're all prepared enough to fight the hypersynthetic snake, so I imagine we'll be fine.

I agree. I think you'll be fine.

Akira looked confused. *So what's the problem, then?*

Alpha's expression remained serious. *The problem is that it's not up to me or you to call the shots this time. It's Katsuya. If he determines that it's a problem and takes an appropriate countermeasure, then we're golden. If he doesn't, well... Let's just hope he makes the right call.*

But if humans were capable of always making the correct decisions, most of the world's problems would already have been solved.

Akira was a bit more worried now.

◆

In his capacity as commander, at least, Katsuya made no wrong judgments.

He had no special talent for being a leader—certainly not enough to lead a unit of this scale. Even so, he did all he could, striving his utmost to be worthy of the title "Commander Katsuya."

It helped that his unit had been rigged for success to compensate for his

shortcomings. The force had been outfitted with gear and weapons that ensured genius-level tactics wouldn't be necessary. Even if Katsuya himself was a bit slow to respond to a situation or ended up making a bad judgment call, the battalion had more than enough at their disposal to win.

Furthermore, Katsuya actually did take some safety measures against the incoming monsters the snake had summoned to the field. First, he sent the monster data that the command vehicle's cutting-edge scanner had picked up to the support personnel, and asked them if it was something they could handle. The personnel had differing opinions on this—some thought Katsuya had made the right decision, others inwardly ridiculed him and his main unit for not being able to handle it on their own, and still more were dissatisfied about squandering their talents on grunt monsters—but they all gave the same response: "No problem, leave it to us."

But Katsuya didn't stop there. He contacted Mizuha, and while he didn't explicitly ask for her to send reinforcements, he did request that she have them ready to move out at any time, just in case. Mizuha accepted, under the pretense that it was only a last resort, and warned him that first he had to exert every possible effort to win with those already on the field.

With these measures in place, Katsuya felt confident they'd be able to survive even a worst-case scenario. Relieved, he let his team know what he'd done. He wanted to show them consideration, to help them realize he had everything under control so they could fight without worry. And just as Katsuya had hoped, their fears largely vanished.

But against his expectations, one of his comrades remained dissatisfied with his decision—in fact, it made her discontent boil over.

The command vehicle that Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi were riding in was equipped with a gigantic monitor that displayed the locations of the entire unit. Katsuya consulted this display as he issued commands to each of his teammates.

Suddenly, one of the vehicles on the display began to move. Until then, it had maintained a safe distance from the hypersynthetic snake like the others, but now it started hurtling toward the monster.

Katsuya saw this and ordered, "Vehicle Two, fall back! You're getting too close to the target."

But the truck ignored his orders and barreled onward, rapidly closing the

distance to the monster. Katsuya looked perplexed. “Vehicle Two, do you read?! Fall back! You’re getting too close!”

The truck still showed no sign of turning around. Panicked, Katsuya screamed into the comms. “Vehicle Two! Turn back this instant! Right now! You hear me?! Respond!”

“I hear you, okay?!” said an angry voice that shocked him.

It was Lily’s, and Lily had not been assigned to Vehicle Two.

◆

Vehicle Two was the armored car with the multigun snail’s laser cannon mounted on top. Lily sat at the wheel, deliberately ignoring Katsuya’s orders.

“I hear you, okay?!” she shouted furiously.

Katsuya’s baffled voice came over the comms. “Huh?! Lily?! Why are you in Vehicle Two?! No, forget that—fall back immediately!”

“I refuse!” she responded—a reply that left no room for ambiguity.

After a stunned silence from everyone in the command vehicle, she heard Yumina’s voice. “Lily, I’m sure you have your reasons for doing whatever it is you’re doing, but ignoring orders in the middle of a hunt is a serious offense, and you won’t get off with just a slap on the wrist. We’ll listen to whatever you have to say, so please: for your own safety, fall back. Katsuya’s worried about you.” Surely, Yumina thought, Lily would cooperate if she not only warned her of the consequences of her actions, but also appealed to her fondness for Katsuya. Even if she ignored the warning, she wouldn’t be able to ignore Katsuya’s feelings and would be forced to comply. “Aren’t you, Katsuya?”

“Of course I am,” came Katsuya’s voice again. “That’s why I want you to—”

“Forget it!” Lily exploded with rage. “You really think I can’t handle it, Katsuya?! You think I’m that much of a burden?!”

Over in the command vehicle, Katsuya froze at her words. He had been completely sincere—he *was* worried about Lily, and had hoped his sincerity would get through to her. But it only had the opposite effect.

“Just now you checked with the support team to see if they could protect us from the monsters, and you even asked Mizuha for backup!” she went

on. “What gives?! Weren’t you the one who hated the way the veterans babysat you the most? This isn’t like you at all!” Hearing no response from the other end of the line (the command vehicle team was all at a loss for words), Lily continued. “If you really don’t think we’re that capable, then sit tight and watch! I’ll prove how wrong you are!”

“All personnel in Vehicle Two, restrain Lily!” Yumina screamed. “You are authorized to use force!”

Lily cut the call and turned back toward her passengers with a bloodshot stare. “You wanna try it?”

Besides Lily, there were three other Druncam rookies in the armored car. Lily had already intimidated them into letting her take the wheel.

“L-Lily, d-don’t you think that ignoring orders is going a bit far?” one stammered.

“Even if they’re from Katsuya, are we gonna follow orders telling us to shut up and stay behind the veterans where it’s safe?!” Lily yelled. “If we weren’t considered weak enough to follow those orders blindly, Katsuya wouldn’t think we needed protection in the first place!”

The other rookies in the car looked at each other. Their expressions showed that they were partly inclined to agree with Lily. With a collective sigh, they steeled themselves and made their decision.

“Okay, fine. So what do we do, then?” another said. “Since you bragged to Katsuya about how you were going to prove him wrong and all that, I trust you have a plan in mind?”

“Of course I do! *This* is the reason I got Mizuha to assign me to this car instead.” Lily pointed upward. “We’re gonna get as close as we can to the snake and fire this thing. If all goes well, that’ll be the end of it.”

The power of the multigun snail’s main artillery piece—a laser cannon—depended on the distance from the target. The closer they were to the target, the more powerful its beam would be. This cannon had been the main reason the snail’s bounty had skyrocketed from one hundred million aurum to one and a half billion, so Lily figured if they got close enough, it would have more than enough power to wipe out the snake in a single hit.

In order to prove what she was capable of, she was willing to aim far beyond her limits.

◆

By now, the support team had taken care of all the monsters in the area. The large pack of monsters approaching from beyond the battlefield was still too far away to attack them, so to kill time Akira was watching the main unit fight. Alpha periodically filled him in on any changing developments.

It seems like Katsuya's unit is in a hurry to win this all of a sudden. That armored car with the snail's cannon is closing in on the snake. I guess they're trying to get as near as they can so that the beam can cause maximum damage.

Uh, isn't that, like, a really bad idea?

Not necessarily. It's a gamble, sure, but if they're successful, they'll be able to really put the hurt on the hypersynthetic snake. And even if they're not, well, what's one vehicle lost, right?

Suppose so. Well then, let's just hope it works, I guess.

The weapon had been frighteningly powerful on the multigun snail's back, but now that his allies had it in their possession, Akira found it a welcome addition to their arsenal. He asked Alpha to zoom in on the vicinity of the armored car on the bird's-eye map in his vision and continued to watch the situation play out.

◆

Inside the command vehicle, Yumina turned gravely toward Katsuya.

"What should we do now, Katsuya?"

"Wh-What do you mean, what should we do?" was his reply.

Sensing she wasn't going to get a specific answer out of him like that, she gave him two options. "Are we going to stop Lily, or not?"

"We're going to stop her, of course. But how...?"

"Roger! Airi, can you take care of it?"

"Leave it to me." With a nod, Airi hopped on one of the bikes stored in the armored transport. Yumina moved to open the back hatch. Katsuya watched them with a dumbfounded expression.

"Wait, wait! What are you guys doing?"

Airi looked puzzled, as though wondering why he would ask something so obvious, but answered his question anyway. "I'm going to jump into Vehicle Two and knock her out," she said matter-of-factly.

“Knock her out...? She’s a comrade, Airi!”

But Airi just looked at Yumina, dead serious. Yumina gave her a stern look and nodded before facing Katsuya again.

“Lily cut the comms, so we can’t negotiate. I ordered the others in the vehicle to subdue her by force, and nothing’s happened—so they’ve either caved to Lily or joined her willingly. There’s no other way to stop her.”

Airi nodded, and Katsuya couldn’t see any flaws in her logic. Yet his expression became grim.

“But that’s... No, if that’s our only option, at least let me do it instead.”

“Absolutely not!” Yumina insisted strongly. “You need to stay here and do your duty as commander. Your unit needs you.” She knew that if she let Katsuya go instead, he’d try to talk Lily out of it first, before resorting to forceful methods. So she’d given the task to Airi, who she knew wouldn’t hesitate for even an iota of a second.

“I’ll ask once more, Katsuya,” Yumina said. “Are we going to stop Lily or not?”

Katsuya couldn’t answer.

Yumina waited for a bit, but he never responded. So she took it upon herself to send a transmission to the entire unit. “Keep firing, but take care not to hit Vehicle Two if you can help it!”

“B-But, Yumina!” Katsuya shouted in a panic. “If they keep attacking, they’re definitely going to hit Lily and the others!”

Yumina looked him right in the eye. “Then be the commander! Take control of the comms and rescind my order! Tell the whole unit to tiptoe around someone who disobeyed you! If that’s your decision—as commander—then so be it. I’ll follow you. I’ll wait as long as you need to make your choice.”

She turned away from him, walked over to the giant monitor, and independently began issuing specific orders to each member. Airi hopped off the bike and moved to help her.

Katsuya only had to make one simple choice: stop Lily, even if it meant ordering his comrades to attack one of their own, or offer special protection to a dissenter despite his status as commander—and risk collapsing the entire chain of command. He had to decide.

But he couldn’t. In the end, time passed by without him coming to a decision.

And that was fine with Yumina.

Katsuya didn't need to make decisions like that. He would never need to turn a weapon on a comrade, nor abandon one. Making such callous judgments was not in his nature. If it came down to it, she would do so in his stead.

She hadn't told him to choose now. She'd told him she'd wait for his decision as long as he needed. This was to prevent him from making that decision altogether.

◆

As the distance between Lily and the hypersynthetic snake shrank, the main unit's barrage didn't let up. Cluster after cluster of missiles bombarded the monster.

Yet Lily's car managed to avoid getting hit by any stray missiles. This was thanks to Yumina's specific commands to the rest of the unit—and it didn't hurt that their target was so enormous that even missiles with low homing capabilities were able to accurately hit their mark.

Lily, however, assumed that Katsuya had agreed with her decision and was making sure she had a clear path. More determined than ever to succeed, she pressed her foot down further on the gas.

It was up to her to decide how close was close enough. Given that the behemoth she was barreling toward was enormous enough to mess with her depth perception, she determined she must still be too far away, and drove closer.

The gigantic snake sent massive boulders and debris flying like pebbles just by writhing around. These landed near Lily's armored car, making awful crashing noises as they struck the ground, until one comparatively small boulder—still larger than a human head—struck the vehicle. The passengers screamed.

"L-Lily?! Don't you think this is close enough?!"

"Not yet! It won't work if we're this far away! We've only got one shot, and we're not gonna get a second chance! We've got to finish it in one blow!"

As they drove closer, the debris grew larger and crashed around them more frequently. A mere shudder from the snake's humongous body would

send tremors through the earth, causing the armored car to shake and sway violently. As the tremors grew worse, it became harder for Lily to make her way forward.

The rookies knew that going any farther would be suicide, and just as they were about to forcibly wrest control of the vehicle from Lily, she made her decision.

"Now!"

The giant laser cannon—once belonging to a bounty monster itself, now in the hands of the hunters—opened fire.

The car had been outfitted with multiple large generators beforehand, maxing out the cannon's energy capacity. A full-power beam, capable of incinerating everything in its path, erupted from the cannon and struck the hypersynthetic snake squarely in the torso.

Where the laser struck, the scales and skin were instantly blown off and vaporized in the atmosphere. Thermal waves flooded outward from them, scorching the surrounding area. The heat haze in the air melded with the continuous beam's energy, igniting the atmosphere. Bursts of high energy reacted with the colorless fog in the air, creating a chain of brilliant, blinding explosions. A searing white light swallowed up the area, and the hypersynthetic snake's figure was wiped from sight.

◆

Akira saw the laser cannon's massive beam strike the snake and the ensuing explosions, and couldn't help crying out, "Did that do it?!"

The light faded to reveal the snake, which looked exhausted after having about a third of its entire body gouged out. Its exposed viscera had been carbonized, not cauterized—as if a portion of the snake had simply vanished rather than being burned away.

"That did do it, right?" Akira said, more uncertain this time. The serpent was not only abnormally gargantuan—it also possessed an atypical amount of life force. And with its head still intact and two-thirds of its body remaining, he wouldn't be surprised if it was very much alive and well after all.

It's not dead yet, Alpha determined. *However, it should be severely injured after that.*

Akira looked both awed and exasperated. *Even that attack wasn't enough? That's insane. What if they'd aimed closer to the head? Would that have done it?*

Perhaps, but in that case the snake would've attacked them before they could fire. Approaching from the tail area was the right decision. They were able to read the snake's movements better, and it became easier to approach. So they were able to get as close as possible.

They couldn't have fired the beam from any closer, then— Huh? Look, Alpha, its head's moving!

The snake began to stir once more, but sluggishly—it really had taken severe damage. But rather than retaliating or running away, it turned toward its shredded tail and began eating it—not swallowing it whole, but tearing it away piece by piece with its sharp fangs (which were much too sharp for a typical snake). Once it had devoured its entire posterior, it coiled around itself on the spot and lay motionless.

Alpha, what in the world is it doing?

I'm honestly not sure either. It doesn't look like it's defending itself, though.

While Akira found it a bit odd that the snake would deliberately leave itself exposed to attack, he decided that since the monster had taken massive damage, he could afford to look on the bright side for the moment.

◆

In the command vehicle, they could hear the whoops and cheers of the other rookies over the wireless, all singing Lily's praises.

Yumina also admitted that Lily's actions had severely wounded the monster, but she had mixed feelings. *This is going to set a precedent.* It would send the message to everyone else that it didn't matter if you ignored orders as long as you produced results, and so the chain of command would crumble. Some would probably recognize the danger to themselves and others if they acted on their own, but others would assume that if Lily could do it, they could too, and try to mimic her. Even if they were ordered to stop, they would ignore it.

In a way, they were only following Katsuya's example. His goal had always been to save people, but it didn't change the fact that his actions

were often reckless. Many of the other rookie hunters looked up to him, were watching his every move, and strove to be like him.

Yumina knew it was too late to admonish Lily for her disobedience—at this point, it would just outrage the rest of the unit. Katsuya's actions had come full circle to bite him in the rear.

Suddenly, the elated voices from the comms became tinged with confusion and worry. The hypersynthetic snake was still moving. Most of the rookies had figured they'd already won and let their guard down, so they were all the more bewildered.

But the snake didn't take this perfect opportunity to strike back. Instead it ate its own tail, coiled itself up on the ground, and remained motionless.

Yumina, like the rest of the unit, saw what was happening. "Don't let up! Keep firing! It's not dead yet!" she ordered.

At that, the main force, which had practically frozen from the shock, kicked back into gear. But they weren't able to deliver the same kind of salvos they had before—the coiled snake made for a smaller target, which meant Lily's car was more likely to get caught up in an explosion. To avoid missing, the rookies had no choice but to draw closer to their target.

Some of the more confident hunters now saw the perfect opportunity to prove themselves as well. With the snake wrapped up and still, they figured it was already as good as dead. And since there was no longer any danger, they were eager to show that they were just as capable as Lily.

So, forgetting their sense of caution, some rookies pulled up right next to the serpent—the closer they were, the more power they thought their combined missile offensive would have. The other rookies saw this, and inspired by their courage, more and more followed suit.

The hypersynthetic snake was an enormous, terrifyingly powerful creature, but it didn't have any long-range attacks. That was why the original—and safest—plan had been to whittle it down from a distance.

And thanks to Lily's efforts, that plan had been completely destroyed.

◆

Because Lily's armored car had gotten far too close to the snake, it had received the full brunt of the residual shock waves from the laser cannon. The impact had been so strong that the car hadn't even toppled over on its

side—it had spun sideways through the air as it bounced along the ground. Luckily, with each spin the vehicle had been upright each time it touched down, so the impact of the tires against the ground had eventually brought it to a stop.

Lily and the other passengers were pretty shaken up, but thanks to their powered suits, they'd gotten away with only minimum injuries. As for whether her attack had been successful, the outcome became clear as she heard the joyous cheers coming from the wireless. Despite everything that had happened, Lily couldn't help but grin.

"Hooray! We did it!"

Overcome with elation and a sense of accomplishment, she took a good look at the hypersynthetic snake. While she was surprised that it still seemed to be drawing breath, it certainly appeared as good as dead—it wasn't moving a muscle.

As her fellow passengers showered her with praise and she took in the full scale of her achievement, she rejoiced from the bottom of her heart that she'd made the right decision.

At that moment, Yumina's order to continue the assault came through the wireless. Now that she had seen for herself that the behemoth snake was on the ropes, she prepared to fire the cannon again, deciding to get even closer this time to finish it off once and for all. After she'd finalized all the settings, it would take a while for the cannon to gather the necessary energy again, so she joined her comrades' missile barrage in the meantime. Arming herself with a missile launcher, she hopped out of the vehicle and fired in sync with the others.

An inordinate number of projectiles struck the coiled target one after another. But even when inundated with explosions, the snake didn't move. The one-sided attack continued.

Swept up in the thrill of battle, Lily began to imagine herself as the leader of the entire battalion. Seeing her unit acting in such solidarity put her on cloud nine. She was having the time of her life.

Then it all abruptly came to an end.

As the snake lay there, its entire body had gradually covered itself in a thick, armor-like shell. Now its outer form burst from the inside—revealing a completely unharmed hypersynthetic snake.

It rose upright, extending to its full height.

Lily and the other nearby hunters stared up at the towering snake that had just emerged, their faces frozen in shock. Then their eyes filled with terror—the gargantuan serpent was tilting toward them. Like a skyscraper toppling over, the hypersynthetic snake slammed into the ground with its full weight.

The earth-shattering impact sent rocks, dirt, debris, vehicles, and people into the air as everything in the area was blown away.

Chapter 98: Chain of Command

Akira watched as the hypersynthetic snake, born anew from its coiled and hardened husk, slammed into the earth, sending an enormous cloud of dust rolling through the wasteland.

That can't be good, right, Alpha? he asked, his expression grim.

Even Alpha looked a bit taken aback. *How strange. Crashing like that had to seriously hurt it. Perhaps it felt that wiping out Katsuya's main force would be worth the trouble?*

At that moment, a call came through from Elena. "Akira, we're going to aid them. Help us transport the injured to the rear where it's safe."

"Roger!" Without delay, Akira headed toward the wounded members of the battalion who remained near the snake.

The other support teams had also decided that it was time to step in. After locating the vehicles that Druncam had issued to each team in the main force and sharing their coordinates, the auxiliary personnel decided among themselves which areas each would cover and set out immediately. The horde of monsters in the distance was drawing closer by the minute—time was of the essence if the hunters didn't want to have to deal with the extra threat.

To rescue the rookies more quickly and efficiently, it was decided that Akira would work at a different location than Elena and Sara. When he reached the area, he found himself close to where the massive body of the hypersynthetic snake lay.

Alpha, that thing's not gonna get up anytime soon, right?

It seems to be unable to rise for the time being. As I thought, it must've taken some serious damage from that slam.

Then why do it in the first place?

Let's think about that later. Right now we need to hurry.

Good point!

Telepathy allowed him to converse with Alpha far faster than verbal conversation, so he'd already determined his course of action as he went

about searching the area with his scanner. Soon he spotted an overturned desert utility truck and a boy lying on the ground nearby who'd been thrown from the vehicle.

Akira checked his condition. The rookie's external wounds weren't severe, but he was unconscious, and it was hard to tell what injuries he might have suffered underneath his powered suit. For the time being, Akira administered first aid by taking some of the medicine he had on hand and shoving it into the boy's mouth.

Next, he flipped the truck back up on its wheels—easy enough with his own powered suit. Such vehicles were quite sturdy, so he guessed it would probably still be fully functional. Now the boy would be able to escape on his own once he was able to move again.

As if on cue, the boy regained consciousness, coughing up a red clot. Blood went flying all over.

"Where...?" The boy looked around in confusion. "Where am I?"

"Oh, you're awake? Can you move?" Without waiting for a reply, Akira grabbed the boy's arm and dragged him to his feet. Then he shoved him into the driver's seat of the boy's truck.

"Check and see if your truck can still run," Akira ordered him. "If it starts, then get out of here on your own."

"Wait! Can you at least tell me what happened?"

Akira cut him off, his tone firm. "Sorry, no time. Ask your buddies when you get to the rear."

The boy was still shaken, but did as Akira said and tried to start the truck—a model issued to the main unit for the express purpose of going up against the hypersynthetic snake, so of course it could take a beating. While it was a little banged up on the outside, it still ran just fine.

"All right, looks like you're good. Now go!"

"W-Wait! There was another person in the truck—my teammate! I've gotta find them!" The boy tried to hop out of the truck, but Akira held him down.

"I'll look for them, so go on ahead," he said.

"No! If I don't hurry, it'll be too late!"

Alpha noticed that the boy was nervous about heading back alone and cut in. *Akira, I think it would be faster if you just brought his teammate to him.*

After some hesitation, Akira gave in. “Fine. I’ll go get your buddy, so wait here. Got it?” He headed off and returned a short time later, carrying what he figured was probably the right body. He sat it down in the passenger’s seat. “This your buddy?”

The boy went silent for a bit before speaking. “Yeah. Probably.”

His comrade was dead. Their head was smashed in, so it was hard to tell whether it really was the person in question. They had paid the price for going into battle without any protective headgear.

“All right, you’ve got your teammate, so go on. I don’t have time to stick around—I’ve gotta rescue the rest before that snake starts moving again.”

The boy hesitated before speaking. “Then let me help,” he finally said, his voice strained with not only the grief of losing his comrade, but regret at not being able to save them.

But Akira shook his head. “Sorry, but I ain’t cocky enough to try rescuing folks while lugging around someone who can’t even walk on his own.”

The boy fell silent again. “Fine,” he said at last. “Save as many of the others as you can. Please.” He understood he’d be useless even if he stayed. Holding back tears, he drove away.

Alpha turned to Akira, as upbeat as she usually was. *Well, that’s one less burden we have to worry about. Now, on to the next one!*

Right...I guess. He didn’t exactly disagree with her, either rationally or emotionally. Still, he felt the situation was a bit too heavy to dismiss so casually.

◆

In the command vehicle, pandemonium swirled around Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi. Over the comms, transmissions from comrades wanting to know their orders came one after another. But neither Katsuya nor Yumina were able to respond.

Yumina looked anguished. The hypersynthetic snake was most likely still alive. Should she order the unit to resume fire? That would most certainly put the members closest to the monster in grave danger—assuming they were still alive as well, which seemed probable. Should she

order the rest of the force, those who hadn't followed Lily, to go to their rescue? No—if the snake started moving again while they were busy tending to the injured, it would only mean more casualties in the end. Should she place her hopes on the support personnel, then? No—she doubted whether she could actually count on them. Then should she give up on winning with only the rookies, bite the bullet, and request reinforcements from Druncam? Honestly, she wasn't sure if Mizuha would even let her, since as of now there still weren't too many casualties.

These and many other ideas came to Yumina's mind, but she found herself unable to determine which of them would be the best option, and so continued to hesitate. She knew things would only get worse if she didn't do something, but she was so caught up in her own thoughts that she couldn't settle on a plan of action.

Katsuya was in a similar state of mind. His thoughts leaned more toward saving his comrades, but he was just as consumed by indecision as Yumina. Who should he save first? And how? If he ordered the rest of the battalion to go save their injured comrades, wouldn't that only cause more people to get hurt in the end? So occupied was his head with such questions that he could no longer think rationally. Thoughts like *no more victims* and *I need to save everyone* caused his mental gears to spin uselessly, faster and faster.

At last his mind, agonizing over what to do and seeking some sort of salvation, conjured up thoughts of the person who'd eliminated his worries so easily before. He recalled what she had told him and smiled wryly. *You were right all along, Sheryl. I'm not suited to the role of commander.*

He was commander in name right now, but if he couldn't issue any orders, then what good was he? Determining that nothing would change even if he stayed here, he cut off the "Commander Katsuya" part of himself and tossed it in the garbage without a second thought.

"Yumina! Take over from me! You're the commander now!"

That jolted Yumina back to her senses, but she was nonplussed at the suddenness of Katsuya's declaration.

"Airi, help her out! I'm counting on you both!" Katsuya grinned widely, as though he'd just been relieved of a huge burden.

Seeing that smile, Airi became just as confused as Yumina.

Then Katsuya hopped onto one of the bikes stored in the armored transport and opened the back hatch. "I'm gonna go save everyone! Take

care of things here for me!”

“W-Wait, Katsuya!” Yumina pleaded.

But Katsuya ignored Yumina’s plea, accelerated, and flew out of the vehicle. The moment his tires touched down, he changed direction and skidded sideways, accelerated again, and sped off toward the hypersynthetic snake. Swearing to himself that he wouldn’t permit any more casualties, he hurried to rescue his comrades.

No, he wouldn’t let anyone else get injured—anyone except himself, of course.

◆

When Lily came to, she was looking up at the sky. Her consciousness was hazy. She didn’t even know how long she’d been awake, but for some reason she thought the sky seemed more beautiful than ever before.

At some point, she realized that she was lying on the ground, and tried to get up. But she couldn’t move. Try as she might, her body wouldn’t respond—and she somehow realized she was already beyond saving.

It was true—Lily was clinging to life by a thread. Her powered suit, unable to fully absorb the impact, had already shut down, and her body inside it was so battered it was a miracle she was still alive. A large amount of blood was leaking from the suit and pooling on the ground, dyeing the area around her crimson.

Her eyes began to lose focus. As Lily lived out her final moments, she felt more loneliness than fear at the fact that she was slowly dying.

Katsuya appeared beside her. Her vision was so blurry that she couldn’t see his face, but somehow she knew it was him.

Oh, Katsuya. You came for me after all... This filled her with joy beyond words, but then she realized that she’d always believed Katsuya would be there to rescue her—and, belatedly, that she’d been counting on him to save her all along.

Sorry, Katsuya. I guess...I really was just a burden to you after all... She wanted to apologize with her own voice, but she could no longer make the words come out. So, with the last bit of her strength, she reached her arm out toward him.

But...I tried my best...right?

Her hand touched the boy's cheek, then—as though the last of her energy had run out—fell limply to the ground. She felt satisfied that she had met him one last time before she died, that she'd been able to touch him at the very end, and that he'd been there by her side during her final moments.

She smiled, and breathed her last.

◆

He hadn't been able to save her. He'd let another person die. Overwhelmed, Katsuya's face twisted in sorrow.

"Lily..."

At death's door, Lily hadn't had the strength to give voice to what she'd felt at that moment, only able to move her mouth weakly. But Katsuya knew exactly what she'd wanted to express—her joy at him having come to her rescue, her regret at having dragged him down, and her desire for him to acknowledge her nonetheless. All had been clearly communicated to him, as though she'd sent those feelings directly to his brain.

Katsuya was holding medicine in his hand—the same he'd tried to give back to Akira. He knew its excellent healing power firsthand. He'd taken it out thinking that if he used it, there might still be a chance she'd survive, but he'd frozen before administering it. For reasons he couldn't quite explain, he'd already known that it was useless—that it was too late to save Lily.

As if to confirm his realization, he heard someone else's voice behind him.

"Seriously? That one's dead too?"

Katsuya automatically turned in the direction of the voice. Several men were standing there, looking upset. These were the support personnel who'd come to aid Lily and the others in the armored car. They'd spotted the vehicle only to find it abandoned, so they'd begun searching nearby for the passengers.

"That's gonna be another deduction on our pay. Dammit, at this rate we'll be workin' for free."

The man who'd voiced his displeasure was dragging along the corpses of the other young hunters who'd been in the car, in order to prove he and his buddies had actually gone to rescue the rookies and hadn't just been

slacking off. One of the other men grabbed Lily's body by the ankles. Before dragging her away, he turned to Katsuya.

"You a survivor, kid? You able to move? Then stop staring like an idiot and get the hell out of here. Don't make us babysit you— Huh?"

One of the other men cut in. "No, now that we've found the girl, that should've been everyone in the car. Look, that kid's got a bike too. So someone else came to rescue them first?" He looked at Katsuya's face with a dubious expression, then recognition dawned. "Wait a minute... Aren't you the commander of the main force? What the hell are you out here for? Who's commanding the unit?"

"No way, you've gotta be kidding me!" the second man spoke up again. "Don't you realize that if you die, our pay's gonna be practically zero?! Go back to the command vehicle already!"

As the men grew more exasperated and restless, Katsuya unconsciously glared at them. The fact that they were more worried about their pay than about several people who had died, plus the careless treatment of his comrades' corpses, angered him. "Is that all you have to say?" he growled.

The men flinched. The boy commanded a presence far above that of a typical rookie. But they were still dissatisfied and began to ridicule him. "Oh, no, we've got plenty more to say. For starters, when you asked us if we were okay handling the grunt monsters, we said yes, but allow me to take that back. I had no idea we were dealing with such idiots."

"You said it. If you guys had just continued fighting like normal, you would've won. So why the hell'd you rush in and put everyone in danger? You got a screw loose or something?"

Katsuya had no rebuttal. Once again, he recalled what Sheryl had told him. Even the best-laid plans could crumble if members of the unit acted on their own; even the simplest of strategies could work if accompanied by a tight chain of command. His orders had been plain, but he found himself thinking that maybe he could've avoided this outcome if only he'd put more effort into getting his comrades to comply.

At that moment, though, the growing tension between Katsuya and the group of men was dispelled. The ground started to shake—a small but unmistakable tremor, heralding that the hypersynthetic snake was stirring once more. The men clicked their tongues in annoyance and ran back to their own vehicle, dragging Lily and the other corpses through the dirt. One

of them reached out a hand to Katsuya, offering to take him along, but the boy swatted it away.

"That's how it's gonna be, brat? Then you can just die out here for all I care!" the man spat, and left Katsuya where he stood.

All alone now, Katsuya turned to face the snake, his expression severe. *It's prioritizing the people closest to it—the ones attacking it, in other words.* Even he had no idea why he'd realized that. Just like when he'd stopped before administering medicine to Lily, it was as if something had made him realize that getting closer and attacking would be dangerous, and that he ought to keep his distance.

But Katsuya ignored this warning. Hopping on his bike once more, he sped up and drove straight toward the serpent. Then, holding a huge gun at the ready, he aimed right at the monster's head and pulled the trigger.

Though Katsuya was the commander and had been expected to stay inside the vehicle and command, he'd also been issued a cutting-edge, high performance suit and powerful weapons and ammunition—not only to err on the side of caution, but also to look the part of an experienced hunter. The gun, so bulky that one needed a powered suit to even wield it, fired right at the snake's head.

The damage was minimal—a scratch at best. But he'd successfully drawn the monster's attention. The gargantuan snake turned to face him. Katsuya grinned—this was exactly what he'd counted on. Then, closing the distance between them, he fired again. He didn't think for a second he could defeat the monster just by peppering it like this—he was simply baiting the enemy to attack him instead of his comrades. These were still in the middle of being rescued, and since they lay so close to the monster, the rest of the main force couldn't resume their missile offensive. Katsuya was trying to remedy that by luring the snake to himself.

He more or less knew where his comrades had fallen. If he could at least manage to lead the snake away from that area, he might be able to turn this around. Driving even closer to the enemy, he continued to fire bullet after bullet. Once he saw the snake finally move toward him, he used the recoil from his gun to sharply turn away.

"Yes! All right, you bastard, over here! That's right, follow me!" He looked over at the snake, and there was no doubt—it was starting to pursue him. He grinned, thrilled that everything had gone according to plan. He

knew this was a reckless, irresponsible maneuver, completely unbefitting of "Commander Katsuya," but he had no regrets whatsoever.

If he couldn't carry out his duty as commander, then he'd change his role to something he could do. He recalled Sheryl's words once more—she'd already taught him exactly what this role was. If he couldn't bring himself to abandon his comrades, then he had to aim even higher than being a great hunter. He had to become not only skilled enough to draw danger away from his comrades, but strong enough to keep himself alive as well. He had to become a legendary hunter.

Katsuya was striving to follow her advice. Now that his wavering conviction had been restored, he would unhesitatingly, doggedly, pursue this goal with unswerving aim. The epic challenges he faced would awaken the power lying dormant within him. Combine this with the natural growth and progression of his physical strength, weapons, and gear, and his performance as a hunter would skyrocket. He was sure of it.

Even as the behemoth snake chased after him, its height rivaling that of a skyscraper—even as he accelerated his bike to its limit, speeding across the wasteland to draw its attention—Katsuya didn't feel the slightest hint of fear.

◆

Akira was still busy rescuing the Druncam rookies when he saw Katsuya riding around trying to draw the snake's attention. Akira felt more exasperated than surprised.

Alpha, looks like some guy out there is being a complete idiot. Is he gonna be okay, you think?

There won't be any problem.

Oh, really? How do you know? Katsuya's behavior certainly *looked* like a reckless, borderline suicidal move to Akira, but maybe there was more strategy to it than he thought. Or perhaps Katsuya really was so skilled that it didn't matter. Either way, Akira was a bit surprised at Alpha's response.

But she was happy to explain her reasoning. *Even if he dies, it's not like it'll affect us any, right? You were hired by Elena and Sara, not Druncam, so it's not like your pay was coming from the syndicate in the first place.*

R-Right. I suppose.

Alpha hadn't said anything inaccurate. In fact, she was absolutely right. Still, Akira felt a bit unsure about how to respond.

◆

Watching from the command vehicle, Yumina saw Katsuya start to lure the hypersynthetic snake toward him, clearly intending to serve as a decoy. Flustered, she forgot she was supposed to be giving rescue orders to the rest of the unit and contacted Katsuya directly. "Katsuya?! What on earth are you doing?!"

"Yumina, keep focusing on rescue operations for now. I'm trying to draw the enemy's attention away from everyone as much as I can, but I've got my hands full just with this and won't be able to lead it in any specific direction. If I end up luring it in the wrong direction by accident, forgive me, but you'll have to take care of it on your end."

He spoke so matter-of-factly that Yumina was momentarily at a loss for words. If he'd sounded like he was prepared to die, then she would have found it much easier to maintain her composure—at least then she'd have an excuse to go and save him. But his tone had been the same as always—unsettlingly so.

"K-Katsuya, what are you saying...?" She realized just how agitated she was, shook her head in an attempt to regain her calm, and shouted at him angrily, "Return this instant! Do you have a death wish?!"

"Death wish?! 'Course not! No way I'm gonna die from something like this!" Katsuya's lighthearted, confident response was meant to keep Yumina from worrying—but also to pump himself up. In other words, he *did* believe there was a chance he might die. Normally, Yumina would've realized this, but it was impossible for her to pick up on such nuances in her current state. Even so, she desperately racked her brain, trying to find something she could say that would get Katsuya to rethink his plan.

"How can you be so selfish, foisting the role of commander on me?!" she finally said. "No one's listening to me because you're not here! They're all wondering where you are and why they have to obey me instead!"

That was, in fact, a lie. Some of her comrades had complained, but the backlash hadn't been so severe as to collapse the chain of command. The battalion was still intact.

Nevertheless, she screamed, “If this goes on, we’re all gonna be in trouble! I’ll try to make an opening for you to escape, so get out of there and come back to the command vehicle now!” She wanted Katsuya to think that if he didn’t return—if the situation didn’t at least stabilize to the point that the main unit would listen to orders again—everyone present would be in danger. As Yumina lied to him, looking sorrowful, she fervently hoped Katsuya would believe her, and that this would be enough to get him to abandon his role as a decoy.

When Katsuya heard Yumina, he believed every word she’d said, and his expression turned grave—albeit for a completely different reason than Yumina was hoping. He couldn’t let anyone else become a victim just because he’d failed to stop someone from acting out of line. He *wouldn’t* let this happen.

He switched his comms to the channel shared by everyone in the battalion and roared angrily, “Hey everyone! Shut up and do as you’re told! I’ll take responsibility for whatever happens!”

Katsuya’s voice resounded over the comms, broadcasting his order—and something else that touched everyone who heard him.

It was Katsuya’s will, transmitted across the wasteland. His comrades, the support personnel, and everyone else in the area heard his intent rather than the sound of his voice. Some of them even turned in the direction of Katsuya himself rather than toward the wireless his voice was coming from.

The spirited shout from the command vehicle’s comms had made Yumina shrink back. She quickly regained her composure, though, and was about to respond to Katsuya that words alone weren’t going to cut it.

But then puzzlement spread across her face—her comrades’ unceasing litany of complaints had completely vanished. Moreover, as she looked at the movements of the unit’s vehicles on the monitor, it seemed like the rookies who’d refused to follow her orders thus far had suddenly decided to comply.

Of course it was because of Katsuya’s transmission—Yumina knew that much. But while she was thrilled and relieved that she didn’t have to worry as much about her comrades acting independently, her expression was still stern. Now there was no more reason for Katsuya to stop being a decoy. She

tried to think of another excuse, but she was still flustered and couldn't come up with anything convincing. Her expression grew more and more distressed.

Then Airi spoke up. "Yumina. We have to save our comrades."

Yumina looked bewildered at this unexpected declaration. She'd felt certain Airi would say that they had to go save Katsuya instead. But then she rationalized the other girl's words: Airi was probably thinking that as long as their comrades were still being rescued, Katsuya wouldn't stop baiting the monster. In order to bring back Katsuya, they would focus on rescuing everyone else for the time being. Yumina gave her strange statement no further consideration. "You're right. Let's focus on saving everyone for now."

Switching gears in her mind, she resumed her duty as commander.

Katsuya was convinced that now there would be no problems with the chain of command. This conviction was not based on any actual reasoning —at least not any that he himself was aware of—but he cut the transmission feeling satisfied nonetheless. Then he fired at the serpent behind him once more. The comparatively small bullet pierced the gargantuan snake, and it seemed to Katsuya that the bullet hadn't even made a dent. Seen from close up, the entry wound would have looked huge, but as far as Katsuya could tell, he hadn't done any damage at all. He unconsciously let out a sigh.

"It's like it's not even effective. I'm luring it away for now, but how long will I be able to keep this up?" Katsuya planned to keep baiting the monster until the main unit had taken it down with their missiles; but once his comrades had all been rescued and the main unit had resumed their barrage, he wasn't sure the serpent would still chase after him. The hypersynthetic snake tended to prioritize attacking the enemies who were closest and had the most firepower. Katsuya had managed to hold its attention so far by firing from close range, but he was afraid that once the battalion was back in action, the snake would start targeting them again instead. To prevent this, he would need to get even closer and attack more aggressively—but even Katsuya felt that doing any more than he already was would be impossible.

Yet on the other hand, he couldn't enlist help from any of his other comrades to join him as bait. After all, he'd chosen to do this on his own in

the first place because he feared his performance would suffer if he teamed up with others. For a while he agonized over what to do—until he remembered that there was one person he could fight alongside without it dragging him down.

Though clear reluctance showed on his face, he told himself he had no other options for the sake of his comrades—and placed a call.

◆

Because the main force had joined in to assist the rescue mission midway through, the task was wrapping up much quicker than it would have otherwise. Even so, by the time they were done, the pack of monsters had almost reached their location. Akira told the main unit it would have to handle the other rescue efforts without him, and sped away in his truck.

Then a call came in from Elena.

"What's up, Elena? Time to reconvene and take care of the horde?" he asked.

"Well, that was my plan initially, but it looks like plans have changed. I got a call from Katsuya—he wants me to patch him over to you. I'm transferring you now, Katsuya."

Akira looked wary. Katsuya's simple order came through the comms: "Time to work. Help me out." Then the connection to Katsuya was cut, along with the call to Elena.

Akira stayed silent for a while. Even Alpha had forgone her usual smile and was wearing a dubious expression as she advised Akira.

Just to remind you, Elena and Sara were the ones who hired you. This is not an order from either of them, so you have no obligation to comply.

He hesitated a bit before responding. *Yeah, I guess you're right.*

I am *right.* Alpha smiled and nodded.

But Akira scowled as though that had just made his mood worse, and he made a sudden sharp turn.

In a rare display of panic at his unexpected behavior, Alpha demanded, *A-Akira?! You're going to go to assist Katsuya after all?!*

Can't help it! It's work! he practically spat in response, as though he was trying to justify doing something he found incredibly unpleasant.

◆

Katsuya continued to ride around the wasteland baiting the monster, but it hadn't become any easier, and in fact was starting to take its toll. The bikes in the command vehicle were the desert utility kind, but they hadn't exactly been designed to combat gigantic bounty monsters. Katsuya had been riding with reckless abandon without any regard for the burden on the bike itself, which was reaching its limit.

If he lost it, he knew, he had no other means of survival—he'd only end up getting crushed under the enormous, towering serpent. *Then you ought to abandon the decoy plan while you can still escape*, came his voice of reason.

Katsuya ignored it and accelerated with even more determination.

Yet he did realize that things would turn out badly for him at this rate, and he grimly racked his brain for a solution. But the only plan he could think of was to give up on baiting the snake. No other good ideas came to his mind.

Then his time ran out. The swarm of monsters that had been heading toward the battlefield finally arrived. One of them, resembling a tiger with eight mechanical legs, had a gigantic cannon on its back. It recognized the hypersynthetic snake as a hostile presence and targeted its head. However, the shell landed on the ground just in front of the snake instead.

Katsuya and his bike were caught up in the ensuing explosion and blasted into the air. It hadn't been a direct hit—as luck would have it, he'd been riding over some debris, and a large piece had clung to his tires and ended up shielding him from the blast. So he himself was unharmed—but he, his bike, and the debris were still blown high into the sky.

Dammit! If I fall from this height, I might be okay thanks to my powered suit, but my bike's gonna be toast!

He now had a new time limit: between now and when he touched the ground, he had to come up with a solution. In his desperation, Katsuya leaped at the first idea that came to his mind. The debris was still stuck to the bottom of the tires, so he accelerated to the max. The wheels spun madly, flinging the debris backward from the recoil—but the wreckage served as enough of a platform to launch the bike forward in midair. While the "platform" was short, Katsuya had already been riding at a high speed

before the explosion, so when he gunned the engine to the max, the bike took off as if fired from a cannon. But in the air, it was impossible to maintain this speed for long, and as its momentum vanished, the bike began to curve in a downward arc.

Once he collided with the ground, his bike would be ruined, and Katsuya would lose his mobility. Then he'd have no way to prevent the hypersynthetic snake from crushing him from behind. To avoid this, Katsuya kicked up off the bike the moment he touched down, as if stomping it into the ground. His bike bore the brunt of the impact as Katsuya flew farther forward—and spotted something coming toward him in the distance.

Am I gonna make it?! He looked grim from anxiety, but now he'd done all he possibly could. If this still wasn't enough, he'd slam into the ground, and the immense serpent would pulverize him.

Please be enough! Please reach! he fervently hoped. And against all odds—by the skin of his teeth—his fall brought him close enough to the vehicle speeding toward him.

The boy in the truck reached his hand out and grabbed Katsuya, negating most of his fall's inertia, and threw him inside. At the same time, the truck veered to the side—just narrowly avoiding the snake's head—made a sharp U-turn, and headed back toward the monster.

Katsuya breathed a sigh of relief. Somehow he'd made it! The tension left his face. But he was too surprised at the boy's presence to immediately offer his thanks—he even forgot his joy at being rescued.

"I didn't expect you to actually show up," he muttered, eyeing him suspiciously.

Then he opened his mouth once more, this time to thank him. But before he could, the boy made a disgusted noise, and Katsuya stopped himself before the words came out.

"Then don't ask me to come," Akira replied, in a tone that further irritated Katsuya, and shot him a glare.

Chapter 99: To Each Their Own Judgments

In fact, Akira had very nearly decided not to help Katsuya.

Had he been directly hired by Druncam, he would have stipulated in his contract that he be allowed to act independently if the situation called for it (like during the Yarata scorpion extermination job) and would have had no business obligation to comply with Katsuya's order. But he'd been hired by Elena and Sara this time, and they trusted each other enough that they hadn't even drawn up an official contract—just made a verbal agreement. So he hadn't even insisted that he be allowed to act on his own and abandon the two women if the need arose.

Akira had the mindset that once he'd accepted a job, he had to do his best. But if Katsuya had contacted him directly, he could have justified refusing on the grounds that his job was with Elena and Sara, and so he had no obligation to go along with Katsuya's demands.

However, Katsuya had contacted Elena and Sara first as intermediaries when delivering his order. In Akira's mind, this was the same as if Elena and Sara had approved the order themselves. And he was on a team with the two women right now, so the responsibility of ignoring Katsuya's orders would fall not only on him but on them as well. And if Katsuya's order were intended for the whole team, then in the worst case Elena and Sara could even end up going to Katsuya's aid in his place.

All of these reasons piled up on each other, driving Akira—just barely—to make the decision to go to Katsuya. And when he'd gotten there, he'd even managed to save him from a grisly fate. So Katsuya's first words to him—"I didn't expect you to actually show up"—really rubbed Akira the wrong way, to the point that he would've actually preferred Katsuya berate him for showing up too late.

"Then don't ask me to come."

"Say that again?!" Despite just having been rescued by Akira, Katsuya

couldn't help but be ticked off by such raw animosity and sourness, and he glared back.

But Akira wasn't fazed. "So what do you want me to do? Be your bodyguard?"

He didn't actually mean it as an insult. But the disgusted tone in which Akira said it made Katsuya flare up—and the way Akira said "bodyguard" brought the word "babysitter" to his mind, which upset him even further.

So Katsuya replied snarkily, "Help me do my job, idiot! Let's draw the snake's attention!"

"Oh, is that all?" Akira sneered and didn't say anything more. *Alpha, sorry to put this burden on you, but take the wheel and get the snake to focus on us.*

Alpha was so puzzled she forgot to wear her usual smile. *I don't mind, but if you're so reluctant to assist him, then why don't you just leave?*

Akira hesitated before responding. *It's part of the job. If you don't want to help, I'm not gonna force you.*

In a sense, this left Akira a possible out. He certainly wasn't keen on dying here with Katsuya, so if Alpha said she didn't want to cooperate or that she wouldn't offer her support, he could use that as an excuse to throw in the towel, saying that it was impossible to do with his own strength alone.

But Alpha couldn't refuse. If she did, this would interfere with another subject's trial. So instead she said cheerfully, *How mean, Akira. I've gone along with every single selfish demand you've made up until now, right? By now, you ought to be buttering me up and saying stuff like, "Alpha, I need you! I can't do this without you!" Right?*

Alpha was just teasing, but Akira smiled wryly. She was absolutely right, he thought. He felt his mood improve just a bit. *Spot on, Alpha! I need you! I can't do this without you!*

Leave it to me! Alpha responded brightly.

The next instant, Akira's truck, which had been running parallel to the snake's head, turned toward it and began rapidly closing the distance. Unlike Katsuya's bike, which had to be operated manually, the truck was directly guided by Alpha via its control system, allowing the passengers to risk getting much closer to the serpent.

Once the truck had gotten as near as possible to the enormous head,

Akira got up on the truck bed, holding his CWH in one hand and his DVTS minigun in the other. With such a large target, he was now more than close enough for them to be effective. He opened fire, raining down both rapid-fire bullets from an extended magazine and the powerful proprietary rounds, which blasted off the snake's scales and the skin underneath. Unlike missile launchers, both firearms grew more powerful as their range decreased, and with Alpha focusing their shots on a single point, they dealt immense damage.

The snake was far from fatally wounded, but neither could it ignore the injuries the guns inflicted. Incensed, the behemoth's head swiped at Akira's truck, as if a giant were wielding a skyscraper as a weapon and sweeping it across the ground. But so huge was the head that it misjudged the distance and passed by just above the ground instead—so close that Akira had to duck to avoid it.

The attack stirred up a huge gust that sent dust and debris flying through the air. Thanks to Alpha's expert driving, though, Akira's truck managed to not get blown away as well. Katsuya crouched down and grabbed tightly to the truck to avoid getting tossed from the vehicle.

The snake came in to attack again. This time it swiped its head not above the ground but along it. Due to the friction from scraping against the ground, this strike was slower than before, but simply ducking wouldn't suffice this time. Once more there came a strong gust of wind in its wake, and dirt, boulders, and debris were flung into the air.

But Alpha maxed out the truck's speed to take evasive action. Gigantic rocks fell around them as they sped forward—one even hit the truck, tearing off an armor tile. Akira and Katsuya focused on defending themselves and dodging. Slowing down his sense of time, Akira kicked away anything sailing toward him, while Katsuya avoided them by weaving to and fro.

The Druncam hunter turned toward Akira with a look of disbelief. *Are you insane?* it said. *I know I said we should be decoys, but I never said to go this far!*

But Akira, sensing what Katsuya wanted to say, met his gaze nonchalantly. "If my job ain't to be your bodyguard, then don't make me protect you," he said. "But if it's too much for you to handle, just say so."

In a sense, Akira's statement could even have been interpreted as consideration for Katsuya: the latter boy wasn't blessed with Alpha's

support, so he was probably having a rougher time. Also, if Katsuya said it was too much, then Akira could use that as an excuse to not get too reckless. But Akira was still in a bad mood, so he felt like goading him a little.

And indeed, Katsuya couldn't see it as anything but a provocation. "Like hell! I can handle more than *you* can, that's for sure!"

"If you say so."

Both raised their guns, pointing them outside the truck, and began firing. The wild spray of bullets, launched from such powerful weapons, hit not only the snake behind them but also the horde of monsters closing in around the truck. The organic beasts were pulverized and torn to shreds in the hail of gunfire, while the mechanical ones were destroyed with a single shot each.

Together the two boys worked at maximum efficiency, mowing down the swarm while drawing the snake's attention. Neither of them had any intention of cooperating with each other, but even as their feud continued atop the truck, they displayed an uncanny level of coordination with one another.

◆

The hunters in the main force had finished rescuing all their injured comrades, and were now resuming their assault on the hypersynthetic snake. They fired missile after missile, intending to empty the arsenals stored in their vehicles.

The support personnel, meanwhile, were busy protecting them from the horde. They'd declared confidently to Katsuya that they could handle this task, and they did so with aplomb, even keeping safe the vehicles that had no combat capabilities and were carrying the wounded to the rear lines.

And after Katsuya's spirited declaration, the battalion's energy was completely restored. In fact, it even seemed to Yumina that their movements were more refined than ever before.

Both friends and foes were constantly moving around the battlefield as they fought, making it difficult to surround the snake. Yumina and Airi constantly had to check and make sure the force was keeping the enemy in range, adjusting the positions of its members accordingly. However,

whether or not their allies were able to obey those orders depended heavily on individual skill. Part of a commander's job was to keep in mind what each person in a unit was capable of and give them instructions suited to their ability.

But Yumina wasn't talented enough as a leader to do that. Even when she'd been commanding alongside Katsuya, she'd made several small mistakes, which had piled up and caused the force to operate at a suboptimal level.

But now they had begun to perform so strongly as a unit that her lack of talent didn't matter. Sometimes the hunters would even correct their own positions before Yumina issued her orders.

Watching from the command vehicle, Yumina was baffled. *Everyone is abnormally skilled all of a sudden. What's going on?* But she shook her head—this wasn't the time for idle thoughts. *Right now, I've got a bigger problem.*

Her face grew more distressed—she had no clue how she was going to bring Katsuya back. The situation had stabilized for the moment, but only because Katsuya and Akira were out there distracting the enemy. It was too late for her to tell Katsuya to abandon that role and come back to the command vehicle—if she did, the hypersynthetic snake would go right back to attacking the main force.

And she also couldn't order someone to fill the decoy role in his stead. That person would have to be extraordinarily skilled just to get close enough to the snake. None of the Druncam rookies were that talented, and she doubted any of the support personnel would comply with an order like that. Most of all, she knew that Katsuya would never allow it.

The only way to save Katsuya now was to take down the hypersynthetic snake. But the serpent was abnormally resilient, and she wasn't sure whether Katsuya would be able to hold out until its defeat—she even suspected that if Akira hadn't come to his aid, he'd likely already be dead. What if he never returned? The thought anguished her.

Wait—could we use the laser cannon?! Even now, she deeply regretted that she hadn't been able to stop Lily. But she found herself thinking that if they already had a laser cannon at their disposal, they might as well use it. And then she hit upon an idea.

From the command vehicle's terminal, she remotely checked the

condition of the armored car with the cannon. Except for the control system (which included the self-diagnostic program she was using to determine the vehicle's status), all the listed functions were broken beyond repair. But since the laser cannon and its generators had been added after the fact, they didn't show up on the inspection list.

Since I can still connect to the control system, the inside of Vehicle Two must be relatively intact. What about the generators? And does the laser cannon still work?

Once that possibility had dawned on her, nothing could stop her. She hardly needed to give orders now that her comrades were performing so strongly together on their own, and this new idea pushed her over the edge.

"Airi, take over for me," she instructed.

"Hm...? Okay." Airi looked a bit dubious at first, but nodded. After all, Katsuya had directed Yumina to take over for him, Airi to help her, and everyone to shut up and follow orders. Taking on Yumina's task wouldn't contradict any of that. Still, when she saw the other girl drag out a folding bike from the vehicle's storage shelf, she couldn't help but feel a bit confused.

"What's going on, Yumina?"

"I've got something I need to do, so I'm heading out for a bit."

Naturally, Airi was shocked. Even if the support personnel currently had the situation under control, there was still a horde of monsters outside. It was far too dangerous to go out alone on a small bike—reckless no matter how she looked at it. She ought to stop Yumina, by force if necessary.

Her decision made, Airi stepped forward. But Yumina's next words halted her in her tracks.

"Katsuya ordered you to stay here and help me out. You can't go against Katsuya's orders, right?" Even Yumina thought this was a low blow. Nevertheless, she looked right into Airi's eyes as she spoke and gave her a gentle smile.

Airi looked flustered, then angry, then hurt. Even so, it was clear she would still remain loyal to Katsuya's commands.

Aware that this might be the last thing she would ever say to Airi, Yumina added, "If anything happens to me, take care of Katsuya."

Her parting words seemed to hang in the air as Yumina opened the back hatch of the vehicle and sped out on her bike.

Airi was left alone. But knowing that it was already too late to stop Yumina, she at least wanted to do a proper job in the role she'd been given. She closed the back hatch and returned to her position in front of the comms.

◆

Yumina sped through the wasteland, heading for the armored car. Her ride was a folding bike supplied for emergency purposes and thus slower than the one Katsuya had used, but it was faster than running on suit-enhanced legs, at least. She drove as fast as the bike would go—time was of the essence.

Guess this means I'm also a dissenter. Now I have no room to talk about Lily. When she thought about how she was doing the exact same thing as the girl she'd harshly criticized not long ago, Yumina felt conflicted.

Even so, she didn't regret it. If she'd stayed in the vehicle, she could have done nothing but pray for Katsuya's safety. And she'd already realized long ago that praying didn't solve anything.

The monsters weren't attacking her yet, as—following Airi's orders—the support personnel nearby were prioritizing any creatures that approached her bike, eliminating them before they could reach her. But the support unit was only supposed to protect the main force. Once Yumina ventured too far, she wouldn't have this protection. The monsters would start to attack her too, and she'd be all alone.

Yumina braked and took out her large gun. Holding it steady with both hands, she aimed it at an approaching monster and pulled the trigger. The bullet shot through the air and pulverized its target in one hit.

"Nice. These have got some serious power—just what I'd expect for ammo meant for Katsuya." The rounds were of a special type of ammunition specifically prepared for Katsuya on this hunt—she'd swiped them from the command vehicle along with the bike. While her gun could technically use them, this wasn't normally recommended because the cartridges weren't fully compatible with that type of weapon and might end up seriously damaging it. Yumina knew this, of course, but she'd used them anyway, fully prepared for her firearm to blow up in her hands. She only hoped it would hold out long enough for her to reach the armored car.

She tapped the gas again, speeding up once more. The gargantuan serpent was now visible in the distance—but to her, the sight of Katsuya drawing its attention nearby was far more impressive. She hoped he could hold out just a little longer.

◆

While Akira and Katsuya continued to scatter gunfire all around them, Alpha consistently kept the truck as close as possible to the snake. As they barreled through the wasteland, the two boys kept up their twin tasks of eliminating monsters near the truck and keeping the hypersynthetic snake distracted.

Naturally, they were quickly exhausting their supply of ammo. Katsuya was the first to run out. Seeing the scowl on his face, Akira pointed toward the back of the truck, where his personal ammo was stacked in the very rear.

"Go ahead, use 'em."

Katsuya's scowl deepened, but he understood that if he didn't take Akira up on his offer, he would only be dead weight, a mere passenger. So he begrudgingly reached for a case.

"I don't owe you for this or anything, got it?" he said, practically admitting he *did* owe Akira for it.

Akira's response was also comically harsh. "You really think so? Then how about hopping out of my truck and hoofing it instead?"

To Katsuya, this is how it sounded: Akira considered letting him ride in his truck a favor, and the longer he rode in it the more indebted Katsuya would be to him—so if he didn't like it, he should get out. Katsuya gritted his teeth in humiliation.

The two boys glared daggers at each other. The blood between them was so bad it was a wonder they didn't kill each other on the spot. Even so, they didn't miss a beat in combat, and their coordination was top-notch as they channeled their resentment for each other into gunfire.

Inwardly, however, Akira was actually a bit puzzled. *Wait a minute—why am I so upset?* He hated Katsuya so much that it seemed almost unnatural. For some reason, the other boy got on his nerves like no other. But when he thought about it, he didn't know why.

If he had to choose between whether he liked Katsuya or hated him, he undoubtedly hated him. But in *this* kind of situation, quarreling and bickering and letting his emotions take precedence over rational thought was definitely strange.

Strange enough to make him realize that something wasn't right.

But Alpha didn't stop me from going, so maybe it doesn't seem that odd to everyone else? Alpha had prevented Akira from starting unnecessary fights on a number of occasions now, so wasn't it a little odd that she hadn't kept him from quarreling with Katsuya? But then again, he reasoned, maybe she'd thought interfering carelessly might make things worse. Or, considering what happened with Lucia, perhaps she figured that even if she did say something, it wouldn't do any good.

Neither possibility was solid enough to satisfy Akira, but this wasn't the time or place to ruminate. First, he needed to cool his jets and try to find a point of compromise with Katsuya. After racking his brain a bit, he thought of something that might work.

"Hey, when you pay back that debt, don't reimburse me—give it to Elena and Sara. I'm doing this as a part of their team, after all."

Katsuya didn't respond for a bit. "Fine," he said at last. With this as an excuse, he too was able to keep his unnecessary irritation at bay.

Thanks to the mutual acquaintances they both respected, a truce had been reached, and the mood in the air became a tad less severe.

Alpha floated above the truck all the while, watching the scene below with great interest.

◆

Yumina somehow managed to make it to the armored car, but looked grim when she saw the extent of the damage—the vehicle was completely totaled. Curiously enough, however, the laser cannon on top seemed to be good as new.

"It's sturdier than I thought. Well, perhaps I should've expected that, since it *did* once belong to a monster worth one and a half billion aurum. Either way, if that's the case, I might actually have a chance!"

She wrenched open the dented door (thanks to her powered suit) and entered the vehicle, then went to the terminal and ran an automated

diagnostic check on the cannon's system. The energy from the generators in the car had allowed the cannon to shield itself with force-field armor, which was why the cannon alone remained unharmed.

The self-diagnostic program indicated the cannon was still functional. Yumina couldn't help but grin. "All right! Just as I thought! Now I only have to get the firing sequence going and have the two boys lure the snake in this direction."

The laser cannon was an addition to the armored car, not originally part of it, and so couldn't swivel. If she wanted to change the trajectory of the beam, she would have to turn the vehicle—but now that the car's motor was offline, that was no longer an option. She could in theory shift the car around using her powered suit, but against a moving target that wasn't realistic. So she had to get the target to come to her instead.

She started the warm-up process for the cannon. No longer on standby mode, it began to gather power. Waves of excess energy began to travel through the area—and the hypersynthetic snake noticed.

◆

Akira and Katsuya were doing an exemplary job of baiting the monster when the snake abruptly did an about-face, ignoring the two boys, and headed in the other direction.

Surprised, Akira had Alpha speed up until the car was level with the front of the snake. Then he aimed both of his weapons at the monster's head, while Katsuya followed suit with his own gun. Ignoring the smaller beasts in the vicinity, they concentrated all of their firepower at the serpent, hoping that would be enough to draw its attention once more.

But the snake pressed on like they weren't even there. Both Akira and Katsuya looked at a loss.

Alpha, what's going on?

The hypersynthetic snake has found a target it wishes to eliminate more than you. Just attacking it isn't going to be enough to lure it now.

So we can't play decoy anymore. That's good news on its own—I mean, I'd kinda prefer to survive—but what's it aiming for?

That. Alpha pointed toward the armored car in the distance with the laser cannon mounted on top, gathering energy and preparing to fire.

Akira looked surprised. *The cannon, huh? But why's it firing all of a sudden?*

At that moment, Katsuya received a call from Yumina, who was shouting so loud that Akira could also hear. "Katsuya! You're still alive, right?! If you can hear me, respond!"

"I'm right here, Yumina!" Katsuya replied. "What's going on?!"

"I checked the laser cannon on Vehicle Two, and it still works! I'm starting it up, but the vehicle's motor functions are destroyed, so I won't be able to change the beam's trajectory! If you can, I want you and Akira to lure the snake into the line of fire!"

Belatedly, Katsuya realized something critical—or to be more specific, he was somehow *made* to realize it—and his face became the very picture of seriousness.

"Yumina!" he screamed. "Get out of there right now! The snake's heading your way!"

"Huh? You mean you've already lured it to my location?!"

"No! Somehow, the snake sensed you were getting ready to fire, and now it's heading toward you! We can't draw it after us anymore!"

"Okay. Then I'll escape as soon as I..." Her voice trailed off.

Katsuya sensed trouble. "Yumina?" he asked, concerned. "Yumina? What's wrong?"

"Ah, nothing, nothing. Everything's fine, don't worry. I'll handle it on my end. If you guys can't continue your decoy role anymore, head on back and rejoin the rest of the force."

"Wait! What do you mean you'll handle it?! What happened?!"

"It's fine, really! Go back to the command vehicle and help Airi command the force! I'll see you later!"

The call cut off. Katsuya was dense in many ways—but not dense enough, at least, to think that everything really was fine.

◆

Once Yumina ended the call, she gave a sigh and smiled wanly. Then, forcing herself to look cheerful, she tried to fire herself up for the task ahead. "All right. I've got stuff I need to do too."

Searching the totaled vehicle, she found a still-intact missile launcher,

complete with ammo, and headed outside. Then, holding her launcher at the ready, she pulled the trigger. The missile hit its target—a large monster heading toward her—and blasted it to smithereens. Originally, the weapon had been meant to take down a bounty monster, so of course it had more than enough firepower to handle a grunt.

Then a mass of other beasts passed by the monster's remains, charging toward her.

"That's a lot of monsters," she said casually, trying to distance her mind from the impending danger, and fired the next missile.

The hypersynthetic snake wasn't the only creature that had been drawn to the cannon's energy.

The moment that Katsuya had quit putting his life on the line as a decoy, Yumina had accomplished her mission and had no more purpose being out here. So she'd planned to leave the cannon as is and return to the main force. But seeing the group of monsters running toward the car, she'd realized escape was no longer an option. In which case, she decided, she'd put up a last stand, doing all she could to keep the area clear of beasts so that the laser cannon could deliver the final blow to the snake unobstructed.

The cannon was indeed pointed in the serpent's direction, but still too far away to guarantee hitting it. The snake was so large, though, that she wouldn't have to wait long before it came in range. Until then, she had to keep the horde from attacking the armored car. If even one of their attacks knocked the car back, the cannon would miss—in the worst case, the snake would be unharmed *and* close enough to attack the vehicle, so everything would be for naught.

"Wow, that really is a lot of them!" she repeated as she fired missile after missile—all she could do to try and prevent that worst possible outcome.

◆

Akira heard about Yumina's situation from Alpha and turned toward Katsuya, his face stern. "Well, our decoy role's over, so what now? Head back?"

Katsuya had been beside himself with panic, but Akira's words now brought him back to his senses, and he glared at the other boy. "Of course

not! We're gonna rescue Yumina, duh!"

"That so?" This time, Akira didn't reply sarcastically to him. He just said telepathically, *You heard him, Alpha. Head there full throttle!*

That's fine, but there's nothing that says we have to help her, you know.

It's part of the job, was Akira's casual reply. However, there was no trace of reluctance in his attitude like last time.

Understood. Then I recommend taking plenty of medicine while you still can.

Gotcha. Akira took out his supply of meds, but before he started downing pills, he warned Katsuya, "We're heading straight to Yumina. If you wanna hop off, now's the time."

"Like hell I'm getting out!"

"Yeah? Then if you have any meds, I'd take some now. Also, I'm about to have my hands full, so I won't be able to protect you even if you beg. You're gonna have to take care of yourself."

"I'd never ask you for something like that!"

Seeing that they were on the same page, Akira nodded and began swallowing one capsule after another. Katsuya looked bewildered—how was heading to Yumina's location related to ingesting medicine? At first he'd thought Akira was just belittling him again, but since the other boy was following his own advice, that didn't seem likely.

Thus puzzling over Akira's behavior, Katsuya missed his window for taking medicine beforehand. And true to his word, Akira didn't wait around for the Druncam boy to get ready.

Let's go, Alpha!

Heading out. Hang on tight! In the next instant, Alpha discarded all concern for her passengers' safety and blasted the truck forward. In order to reach Yumina as quickly as possible, she drove as fast as possible over the bumpy wasteland terrain that was absolutely *not* suited for high speeds, ignoring traditional paths in favor of creating her own.

Her driving skills were on a level that no human could hope to reach. Whenever she came to areas that would normally require a large detour to get across, she overcame the obstacles in question by launching the truck over them, using nearby slopes and pieces of debris as platforms. Once, the truck did a double somersault as it went airborne, but even that had been within Alpha's calculations—the truck safely landed on its wheels before

Alpha accelerated back to maximum speed.

Of course, Alpha's driving took quite a toll on her passengers. Each time she sped up, braked suddenly, made sharp hairpin turns in either direction, or made the truck flip horizontally, vertically, or diagonally, it took everything Akira and Katsuya had to avoid flying out into the desert.

Akira was only able to weather it because of Alpha's support. She kept adjusting his movements to match the truck's via the control system on his powered suit, lessening the burden on his body. However, his stamina dwindled nonetheless, and his body was burning through the medicine so fast that Akira could actually feel it. One at a time, he began swallowing extra capsules stashed in his mouth to gradually restore his depleted strength.

Katsuya had no such protection. He would have flown from the vehicle had he not gripped its side with both hands for dear life—in fact, the truck's momentum as it pitched around had already tossed both his legs over the edge. It felt like his body was being torn apart, but he somehow managed to hold on.

As he tried desperately to get the rest of himself back in the vehicle, he now understood why Akira had warned him to take medicine beforehand. He glared in Akira's direction and was about to yell at him in protest, but he gritted his teeth and resisted the urge. Akira looked like he was struggling just as much to remain aboard. That meant all this sudden reckless driving wasn't a malicious prank on him—Akira actually was trying to reach Yumina as quickly as possible.

So Katsuya couldn't complain—if he did, he'd be admitting that he couldn't handle it and that he'd only drag Akira down. His arms felt like they'd nearly twisted off, but with a great deal of strength and willpower he managed to pull himself back into the truck.

Akira, straight ahead!

Roger! Akira clambered on top of the violently undulating truck bed and struggled to aim his guns forward. A large monster was in his sights—at this rate, it would collide with the truck. Even so, Alpha didn't let up on the gas.

Akira dispatched it with both weapons—a single proprietary bullet from the CWH killed it instantly, then a curtain of DVTS minigun fire rendered its body down. All that was left was a sort of fleshy ramp.

The next instant, Akira's truck launched off it into the air.

Akira, another one straight ahead.

Got it! Akira moved to the front edge of the truck bed and fired at the large carnivore on the ground below. This time, his gunfire shredded the monster into a meaty cushion for the truck, allowing the vehicle to maintain its speed as it landed. Off they raced along the desolate terrain once more.

Good work, Akira! We're getting pretty close now. Past this point, the ground levels out some, so I'm going to drive a bit more smoothly.

Y-Yeah? Great. Akira managed to return to his seat, and Katsuya was finally able to throw himself over the edge of the truck, landing inside. After swallowing several capsules of medicine each, they both sighed in relief. (Katsuya did have reservations about using the meds he was supposed to return to Akira, but in the end told himself that now wasn't the time to be worried about that.)

Then they heard a loud *CRASH!* from behind the truck. The hypersynthetic snake had smashed through something blocking its path and was hot on their tail.

Chapter 100: Choices and Consequences

Yumina was still fighting for her life when she saw the gigantic figure of the snake looming ahead.

"Looks like it's about time," she muttered—not because the snake was about to reach the spot she wanted, but because she knew she wouldn't be able to keep the horde of monsters at bay long enough for the bounty monster to get there. Now she could only hope that when she fired the cannon, the laser would at least hit its target before she was trampled by the multitude. Not that she'd be able to survive either way—she'd try her best to escape on her bike, but the logical part of her said not to count on succeeding.

"Well, at least Katsuya will be safe. That's all that matters. I've now done everything I need to." Satisfied and resigned, she accepted her fate and targeted another grunt monster. But just as she was about to fire, its head exploded, and something blasted a hole in its torso from behind. Shocked, Yumina forgot everything else she'd been feeling up until then.

A call came in from nearby. "Yumina, it's Akira. Respond if you can hear me."

A beat later, Katsuya's voice came from the Druncam-only channel. "Hey, what do you think you're doing, connecting to Yumina without permission?! Yumina, it's me, Katsuya! Are you all right?!"

The voices of the two boys coming from separate channels left her nonplussed, but she managed to respond, "Yumina here! Don't worry, I'm fine."

"Yeah? All right, we'll take care of the monsters around you!" came Akira's voice. "You got your hands free to fire that cannon? If not, get out of there pronto, and we'll cover you!"

"Hey! Don't just decide things on your own, dammit! Yumina, we'll protect you, so run away right now!"

"I mean, if she's able to fire it, she might as well, right? Otherwise, there's no point to everything she did in the first place. So what'll it be,

Yumina?”

Hearing Akira’s cool voice contrasting with Katsuya’s flustered one, Yumina couldn’t help but snort in amusement. All the resignation she’d felt vanished in an instant. Feeling her spirits rise once more, she responded joyfully, “I can fire it, no problem! Akira, can you direct me on the timing? I can’t change the trajectory of the shot, and if I try to judge when to fire on my own, it might end up hitting you guys as well!”

“But Yumina—”

“Katsuya, shut up for just one second! Can you do it, Akira?”

“Do you have to be in the vehicle to fire? Can’t you enter the command remotely, or set it on a ten-second delay or something?”

“There’s no way to do it remotely. And there’s no timer setting, though I can adjust the firing sequence to approximate one. Twenty seconds is the most I’ll be able to manage, though.”

“Then I’ll guide you. When I give the signal, set it to fire in twenty seconds and head as far away as you can in the opposite direction.”

“Understood! I’ll give it a whirl. And Katsuya, you behave yourself, okay?! If I hear that you got into some stupid argument with Akira even in a serious situation like this, you’re gonna answer to my fist!” With that, Yumina ended the call.

Now she could only do the task before her. True, such had been the case before the two boys contacted her—but her smile was genuine now. Things were looking up.

◆

Once Akira (really just relaying Alpha’s instructions) finished telling Yumina what to do, he returned to the truck bed and went to work slaughtering monsters. And with Yumina’s ultimatum hanging over him, Katsuya also swallowed his pride and, with a sour look on his face, joined the fight. The hypersynthetic snake was stirring up dust as it raced after them, but the two boys fought like it wasn’t even there.

Alpha, help me with Yumina’s countdown.

Of course! Counting down from thirty seconds. I’ll wait a bit before starting.

Gotcha. Hey, real quick—I’ve been wondering, why’s the hypersynthetic

snake going after the cannon like that, anyway? Shouldn't it be running away if it doesn't want to get hit by it again?

I couldn't say. Even I don't understand what's going through a monster's head, especially organic ones. But if I were to hazard a guess, perhaps it's mutated to the point it can no longer think clearly?

Hm. I was thinking maybe it just got frenzied with rage, but I guess I was wrong.

No, you could be right. Or wrong. It doesn't really matter either way since it's about to bite the dust. I'm starting the countdown, Akira.

Roger! Akira connected to Yumina and, since Alpha couldn't speak to her, voiced the countdown in her place. "Yumina! I'm starting now!"

Thirty, twenty-nine, twenty-eight...

"Thirty! Twenty-nine! Twenty-eight!" Akira yelled the numbers so as not to be drowned out by the deafening gunfire.

◆

As she listened to Akira count backward, Yumina finished her preparations with the cannon. All that was left was to touch the terminal just once to fire. She tore open the armored car's back hatch and set her bike up right outside. Now she could hop on at nearly the same moment she input the command, allowing her to escape the danger zone as fast as possible.

But right then a problem appeared. Through the open hatch, she spotted a monster charging straight toward her from some distance away. Akira and Katsuya were busy with the monsters approaching the armored car from the front and sides—they wouldn't have time to turn and take down a target coming from directly behind.

"Seriously?!" Yumina leaped out of the car with her missile launcher and fired. A missile blew the monster to smithereens.

Then she heard the countdown once more: "Six! Five! Four!"

"Oh no!" With a quick hop, she was back inside the vehicle.

"Three! Two!"

She rushed forward. The control terminal was right in front of her...

"One! Zero!"

—She mashed the button on the terminal.

"Akira! Katsuya! I've started the firing sequence!" she shouted as she

ran out of the vehicle, hopped on her bike, and began speeding away. Hoping that they, too, would manage to escape, she shouted into her comm one last time, “The main cannon doesn’t have a countdown of its own, so get out of the way!”

She drove off, leaving the danger zone behind.

◆

Akira grimaced at the scene before him. A great mass of energy was gathering into the main cannon.

Oh, shit. Alpha, make sure that doesn’t hit us! Please!

Oh, don’t worry, I have your back. If it did hit, neither you nor your truck would be left.

Say, we’ve taken out all the nearby monsters, so why are we even still here? It’s not like the hypersynthetic snake is after us*, so we might as well make tracks.* With no danger of any monsters knocking into the car and disrupting the cannon’s aim, Akira figured all they had to do now was dodge to the side to get out of the line of fire.

But Alpha shook her head grimly. *I’m sorry to say this, but we might not be able to avoid it at this rate.*

Wait, what? Why not?

I’m unable to determine exactly how wide that beam’s going to be when it erupts, but judging from the amount of energy it’s gathering, it could even cover a 180-degree angle.

Um, so even if—hypothetically—we moved five hundred meters to the side, if we were in front of the laser we’d still get vaporized?

Bingo!

Akira panicked, naturally enough. *W-Wait! Why did Yumina set it that way?!*

Perhaps she didn’t set it properly, since it originally belonged to a monster, or perhaps the control system was damaged back when the snake attacked. Either way, I don’t think it was intentional. And maybe I’m just worrying for nothing, and it’ll fire normally. I’m just saying there’s a chance.

A chance, huh? Well, knowing my luck...

That’s why we need to get behind the laser, so that it won’t hit us no

matter how bad your luck is, right?

Akira's face went taut. *Alpha! Full speed! Now!*

I'm pretty sure we'll make it even at normal speed—but okay! Full speed ahead! Alpha grinned, and once again rocketed the truck forward without any regard for impact on her passengers, who were left to quickly grab any parts of it they could. The vehicle left the approaching snake in the dust, racing along the ground at top speed. Akira and Katsuya wore looks of desperation as they zoomed past the armored car.

Once it finally slowed down, Akira breathed a sigh from the truck bed and glanced behind him. All the light in the area seemed to be gathering near the mouth of the cannon, and the excess energy caused the surrounding air to appear distorted.

Then at last the gathered power—drained from all the generators in the armored car—erupted from the cannon as a torrent of light.

The gigantic beam—large enough to raze everything nearby—struck the hypersynthetic snake at point-blank range. The entire area was swallowed up in its radiance. The residual energy waves alone created explosions that scorched the snake's surroundings, sending dirt and rocks flying through the air. A huge cloud of smoke arose.

“Did we do it?!” Akira’s eyes were glued to the scene. The blast had been so enormous that the smoke showed no sign of clearing away. Only after Akira’s truck, which had been gradually slowing down, came to a complete stop, and Yumina had made her way back to the armored car on her bike, did the smoke finally begin to dissipate.

Akira, Katsuya, and Yumina all watched with bated breath as the air cleared to reveal the area once more. A headless hypersynthetic snake lay on the ground. Its torso, apparently also pierced by the laser, had been partly vaporized, leaving only a gaping hole. The bounty monster worth two billion aurum had been defeated.

The main force let out shouts of joy. Katsuya and Yumina hugged each other in elation.

Akira breathed a sigh of relief, then another one of exhaustion. He wasn’t smiling. Katsuya had gotten out of the truck and was busy celebrating with Yumina, but Akira considered his job done and drove away.

Katsuya noticed him leave and looked puzzled. Yumina even called out after him.

“Wait! Where are you going, Akira?!”

Akira ignored them both, leaving them in the dust.

◆

With the snake defeated, the battalion made short work of the rest of the monsters in the area. The main force reunited with Katsuya, and the support teams went on patrol duty, guarding the perimeter until the personnel from the Hunter Office arrived.

Akira was patrolling his area alone. However, he’d left all the scouting to Alpha, so he was actually just taking it easy in the driver’s seat. His exhaustion and irritation were visible on his face as he sighed.

“Man, I’ve had enough,” he said out loud.

If you’re that tired, why don’t you head home? It’s not like Druncam hired you. If you tell Elena and Sara you’re exhausted, I’m sure they’ll understand.

Normally Akira would’ve refused on the grounds that he’d feel guilty, but right now he was so tired and moody that he had no more fight left in him, and Alpha’s suggestion won out.

“Yeah, maybe I should...” He called up Elena. “Elena, I’m really sorry, but do you mind if I go on home? I’m pretty tired,” he said in a voice that betrayed how drained he truly was.

But there was no response. Normally, Akira would’ve wondered if his selfish request had upset her, but right now he was too tired to care, and called her name again.

“Elena? You there?”

After a bit, she responded, “Huh? Y-Yeah, I’m here. I understand. See you later.”

Elena’s tone was different from normal. Sara followed up in her normally cheerful tone, but it was clearly forced. “Akira, if you want to go back home, that’s fine, but before you do, can we talk? Don’t worry, we’ll come to you, so just stay put.”

“Huh? O-Okay. I’ll be here.” Akira found their request strange, but cut the call and waited for the women as he had been told.

Elena and Sara arrived very shortly afterward. Seeing them exit their car, Akira also decided to get out of his truck despite his weariness, figuring he ought to at least give them a proper goodbye before heading home.

“Sara, what’s up?”

“Hm? Just a sec,” Sara said, and unzipped the top of her body armor, revealing the bra supporting her voluptuous nanomachine-infused breasts. As Akira stood frozen in shock, Sara embraced him, burying his head in her cleavage.

“S-Sara?!”

“There, there, Akira. There, there.” Sara’s tone was as cheerful as ever, but her expression was stern as she continued to soothe him. Akira was absolutely baffled, but made no move to push her away.

Relieved to see this, she gently began to explain. “You’re probably wondering what’s gotten into me all of a sudden, but honestly, I’m not sure myself. I’m iffy on a lot of things right now.”

Akira’s confusion only deepened, and feeling Sara’s chest against his head certainly didn’t help to clear his mind. He remained still.

“What exactly am I iffy on, you ask? Well, we’re both not sure how to feel about you going to help Katsuya, for one thing.” Elena and Sara both recognized that going to Katsuya’s aid had clearly been outside of the job description, yet Akira had done it anyway. At the time, they’d been

conflicted over whether to stop him.

"We knew that by not keeping you from going, we were more or less giving you the go-ahead. But you always complete the jobs you're given, and you have an excellent track record, so we figured it was the right decision. I could make it sound nice and say that it was because we trusted you could handle it, but in the end we really just put you in unnecessary danger. And we were afraid that if we apologized, you might think we're underestimating your ability and get angry—but if we *didn't* apologize, you might be upset and think we intentionally pushed the dangerous work onto you. So we felt iffy about what to say to you."

Her feelings were flowing out in a stream of consciousness now. "You went to go help Katsuya without a word of protest, but maybe if we had intervened, you wouldn't have. In fact, if you'd asked us our opinion, we probably would've told you to stay put. You're likely upset at me now wondering why I'm saying all this after the fact, but if I hadn't said anything, you might've thought we really wanted you to risk your life like that... And whether we praised you for doing a good job or apologized for putting you in danger, we figured you'd probably be upset that we stayed behind while you did all the work..."

At this point, Sara's thoughts were so jumbled that even she wasn't sure what she was saying anymore, and she tried to sum it all up. "Well, anyway, I know I've just been rambling, but that just shows you what a mess our thoughts and feelings are right now. Neither of us knows how to properly handle this situation, but know this—whatever happens, both Elena and I would like it if we could still get along with you. This whole thing might sound like excuse after excuse to you, but at least trust us when we say we really do want to be your friends. But if you don't want that, them's the breaks, I suppose."

"N-No, I really do want it," Akira stammered. In fact, Sara had correctly guessed several of the thoughts going through his head during her speech. But he also understood that they were trying their best to maintain a friendly rapport with him, which made him more pleased than otherwise.

Sensing this, Sara gave him a big smile. "Good to hear! Thank you, Akira. So, with that out of the way, what do you think we should do now? Should we praise you for a job well done, or apologize for putting you in danger?"

“W-Well, it was my decision to go in the first place, so I don’t think it really matters—”

“Out of the two choices, which will it be?”

“W-Well, out of those two, I-I’d rather be praised, I guess...?”

“Excellent job, Akira! Extraordinary! You did amazing! Outstanding!”

“Th-Thanks,” he muttered, embarrassed.

Feeling the awkwardness in the air growing thicker, Sara tied up the conversation. “Well, anyway, our individual feelings aside, the important thing is that we’re all friends here, so we might as well share our iffiness! Feeling iffy yet, Akira?”

“I am, I really am. So please, could you let go of me now?”

Sara chuckled. “Oh, c’mon, no need to hold back,” she teased.

“Please let me go,” he insisted more strongly.

Sara released him from her chest. His face was beet red, and his lips were curled in a pout, but he was clearly in a better mood than he had been before the two women arrived.

Seeing that they were all feeling a bit more comfortable, Elena spoke up. “All right, now that the iffiness is out of the way, time to discuss something that we really *do* need to decide on.”

“What is it?”

“Your pay. I’ll cut right to the chase—how much do you want?”

“I mean, I don’t know the standard pricing for a job like you hired me for, so you guys can decide that again, like last time.”

“Well, if we were to do that, the entirety of what we earned as a team would go to you—and it still wouldn’t be enough to properly reward you for your efforts today. So that puts us in a pickle, you see.” Akira looked confused again, so Elena explained. When she’d taken the job from Druncam, she’d really only expected they’d be dealing with grunts, since they were just supporting the main force. It was supposed to be a simple job with comparatively good pay—enough that hiring Akira shouldn’t have been a problem.

But Akira had gone above and beyond the call of duty. Even ignoring that the casualties from the main force would be deducted from their pay, Elena and Sara simply wouldn’t make enough to properly compensate him for his deeds. To begin with, Druncam had wanted the support team to interfere as little as possible, so they’d stipulated in the contract that the

support teams wouldn't receive a single extra aurum, no matter how active they were in the battle. Even if Elena gave Akira their entire pay, it wouldn't be sufficient. And since their team was under contract with Druncam, Elena's hands were tied.

But Akira had been hired by the women, not Druncam. In other words, it was their responsibility to pay Akira what he deserved. As fellow hunters and as friends, they didn't want him to feel cheated. Still, they couldn't pay what they didn't have, so Elena and Sara wanted to discuss with Akira how to proceed.

Understanding at last, Akira gave a small smile. "If that's the case, then we'll just split it between us. Give me a third, and we'll call it even."

But Elena grew upset. "No, absolutely not! We hired you, so we're going to pay you properly, and that's final! So give us a proper amount."

"F-Fine. But you're not gonna have enough, right? So what are you gonna do? This might sound weird coming from me, but ultimately I chose to help Katsuya on my own, so I'd feel really bad if you ended up in debt because of something I did without permission. Please just let me take the third."

"I *was* thinking I might try to renegotiate the contract with Druncam to up the pay," reflected Elena. "Normally it'd all be set in stone, but given your achievements during this battle, I might have a bit of leverage I can work with. But renegotiating would take some time, so it'll be a while before you'd get your money. I'm sorry, but would you still be okay with that?"

"Yes, that's fine with me. I'm not hurting for money or anything—I've still got plenty as it is."

"Great! Thanks for understanding," Elena said with a smile. But then her expression clouded over. "That being said, I can't guarantee negotiations will go in our favor. Contracts carry a lot of weight within Druncam and aren't so easily overturned. I hope they don't just end up blacklisting us instead." Being a skilled negotiator, Elena knew the significance of entering into a contract, and this only added to her worry.

Seeing the troubled expression on her face, Akira suddenly had an idea. "Then why don't you ask Yumina and Katsuya to vouch for you? They said they owe all three of us for what we did, after all. If the battalion commander himself vouches for raising your pay, I bet those guys at

Druncam will have a harder time refusing—that is, if those two really were serious about owing us."

Elena hadn't expected Akira to offer input on negotiation matters, but she found his suggestion intriguing all the same. "Not a bad idea at all. I'll talk to them. It's too bad I can't tell you to expect results, but I'll do all I can." With that, Elena had said all she needed to say, and the two women made their farewells. "Well, I'm sure you're exhausted, so we'll let you get on your way. I need to stay behind as team leader, but I'm sure Sara would be happy to take you home if you'd like."

"No need. I'm fine."

"Really? Okay then, good work today, Akira. See you later!"

Akira returned to his truck and waved goodbye to them from the driver's seat before driving away. Elena and Sara waved back and watched him disappear.

Once Akira had made it a fair distance away from the rest of the battalion, he stretched in his seat. "Whew, man, I'm exhausted. Alpha, take over driving for me. And if you can help it, try not to run into any monsters on the way."

Sitting in the front passenger's seat, Alpha replied with her usual smile. *Not a problem. By the by, you look like you're in an awfully good mood.*

"Really? All I feel is tired. And not in the comfortable way either."

Could it be that you're still under the spell of Sara's chest?

Akira sputtered and glared at Alpha.

She merely responded with a teasing grin. *What a shame! Even though mine are superior in shape, luster, and presence, I suppose it's no good if you can't feel them, hm?*

Unable to answer her, Akira decided to give her an iffy response and catch a nap instead. "I'm going to sleep. Wake me up if something happens." He closed his eyes and gave in to his tiredness. The urge to sleep instantly assaulted him. He didn't resist, and was fast asleep in no time.

Alpha observed him, deep in thought. She found it fascinating that something so insignificant and trivial had wiped away all that irritation, dissatisfaction, and displeasure he'd felt during the battle.

◆

After parting with Akira, Elena and Sara continued to do their duty as support personnel, patrolling the area. But since the monsters had already been taken care of, they were basically just on standby, allowing them plenty of time to think.

Elena spoke up first. “Hey Sara, I’m kind of curious: Why’d you shove Akira into your chest like that back there?”

“Hm? Oh, that? I was just checking something. I got the sense that Akira isn’t entirely uninterested in that sort of thing, so I did it as a test. If he’d still pushed me away and told me not to touch him, it likely would’ve meant he had no intention of continuing our relationship. I just wanted to see if that was really the case.”

“Ah, makes sense.”

“Well, I’m glad my worries were unfounded, though.”

“It helps that you didn’t exert yourself in this battle, so your chest didn’t shrink. That probably counted for something, I expect,” Elena teased.

Together they laughed, just glad that they’d managed to preserve their friendship with Akira.

Then Elena’s face grew a bit more stern. “I actually have another question. Why didn’t you stop Akira back there? Was it only because *I* didn’t?”

Sara hesitated.

Before she could answer, Elena continued, “If that *was* the reason, then while it makes me incredibly happy to hear you trust me that much, please stop him next time that happens.”

Sara looked apologetic and sighed. “Sorry, but that’s not it. This might just sound like an excuse, but the thought of stopping him never even crossed my mind.”

At that, Elena sighed as well. “I thought so. You too, huh?”

“It didn’t occur to you either, Elena?”

“Yes. When I think back on it now, it’s strange. Normally I would’ve either stopped him or disputed that order of Katsuya’s, or at the very least confirmed whether Akira was really planning to help him.” Her expression turned grim. “But I didn’t do any of that. I didn’t even consider it. For some reason, at the time all I could think was that I needed to let him go.”

Sara reflected on what Elena had said, and then hit upon something. “You think we were somehow both taken in by Katsuya’s aura back then?

That sure was something else."

I'll take responsibility for whatever happens, so shut up and follow orders, Katsuya had commanded the entire battalion. Naturally, Elena and Sara had heard his message as well, and it hadn't escaped Elena's notice that afterward the battalion seemed to have become much stronger and tighter as a unit.

Confidence drew people to you, got them to obey you. A unit with a confident leader was going to perform far more efficiently than one without. This was common knowledge, the most basic of basics. But confidence was no guarantee that one was always in the right. If Elena and Sara really had been taken in by Katsuya's declaration to the point where it affected their own judgment, then to them it served as proof of their own inexperience.

"If so, then I guess we've still got a long way to go, huh?" Elena said as if chiding herself.

"Well, if that is the case, then let's at least chalk it up as a win that we were able to notice our mistake, and work that much harder to keep it from happening again in the future."

"I like that attitude! Sounds good to me."

Moping about it wouldn't solve anything, so they put on cheerful smiles instead and chose to look forward rather than backward.

Then a vehicle from the main force pulled up beside them—with Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi aboard.

◆

Once Yumina had returned to the command vehicle with Katsuya and the two had followed through on everything they needed to after the successful hunt, Yumina had searched for Akira's truck, wanting to properly thank him in person. The vehicles belonging to the support teams directly hired by Druncam were all displayed on the monitor, but indirect hires weren't displayed—officially they weren't listed as participants, and so were treated like they didn't exist.

So she'd decided to go ask Elena and Sara where he'd gone, bringing Katsuya and Airi along as well.

"Akira? He's already gone home."

Yumina was stunned. She had assumed he'd at least stick around to get

back the medicine her team owed him, since he'd said he'd only accept it after the hunt.

Katsuya was just as astonished, albeit for a different reason. "That bastard... Just 'cause the snake's been defeated doesn't mean the job's over!" He'd at least expected Akira to stick around until their entire task was finished, so this threw him for a loop.

But Elena wore a no-nonsense expression. "We were the ones that hired him, so it was our call to make. I sent him home because he looked absolutely exhausted. If you want to complain to someone, complain to me."

"I-I'm not really complaining—"

"Really? Good."

Katsuya sensed that Elena and Sara were acting colder toward him than usual, but he wasn't sure why. In fact, the pair were making a conscious effort to avoid getting taken in by his charisma again, but Katsuya had no way of knowing this. Yumina noticed as well and felt uncomfortable, but bowed her head anyway.

"Elena, Sara, thank you for all your help today. We wanted to offer our gratitude to Akira as well—do you think you could call him for us?" Yumina, Katsuya, and Airi had no way of contacting Akira on their own, so she figured it wouldn't be a problem to ask Elena to get in touch with him instead.

Elena and Sara exchanged glances. "I think not. I just told you he's exhausted. Leave it for some other time."

This wasn't what Yumina had expected. "Uh... R-Right, we'll do that, then."

"Is that all?"

"Um, yes, that's all we came for." By this point, the tension in the air was clear, and things were beginning to get awkward, so Yumina decided to leave it at that.

But Elena wasn't finished. "Before you go, Katsuya, I have something I want to ask you."

"What about?"

"Why did you call on Akira for help back there?" Her tone sounded reproachful.

Katsuya involuntarily flinched. "Uh, was there something wrong with

that? He might've just been support personnel, but he was still technically part of the force."

Elena shook her head. "That's not the issue here. I'm not saying it was right or wrong, whether you misjudged, whether it was a good call for the force as a whole, none of that. I'm simply asking why you decided to let him help you."

Katsuya fell silent, unsure how to respond. But he knew in her current mood Elena wouldn't accept silence for an answer, so he gave the most succinct reply he could. "'Cause he's strong," he muttered.

"Hm. I see."

Neither Katsuya nor Yumina were able to get a read on Elena's feelings from that brief response, and so were at a loss.

Then Elena gave them a smile—the smile of a negotiator. "By the way, I heard from Akira that you two felt you owed the three of us. Is that true?"

Yumina exchanged glances with Katsuya, and they both nodded. Indeed, they'd said so back at Yonozuka when they were in Akira's truck.

"Is that so? Then I apologize for being so forward, but I'm going to have you pay that debt back right now. I want to renegotiate our pay for this job with Druncam. Could you get in touch with Mizuha and help me talk her down?"

Elena and Sara both wore smiles, but their eyes bored into the two Druncam hunters, who knew that they had no choice but to comply.

◆

Meanwhile, the Hunter Office inspectors who'd arrived on the scene were busy examining the corpse of the hypersynthetic snake.

"Damn, this thing's big! Just how wide d'you think that torso is anyway? It couldn't have been easy to take a behemoth like this down."

"I'm more curious about why it had a husk like a shell. It's a snake, so shouldn't it have molted instead?"

"Probably because it's not actually a snake, if you wanna get technical. It's classified as a snake*like* monster. That means it's different from the normal kind."

"Does that also explain why there's a giant hole in its body?"

"A hole? Well, that'd be from the laser cannon, wouldn't it? Probably

shot right through, I reckon."

"No, this is clearly different. The cavity seems to run along its entire torso and goes as deep as its innards. It's not like a stomach or any other organ either, so what the hell is it? It's as if something long and thin was stored in its body and burst out all of a sudden."

"This was one of those types that absorbs what it eats, so maybe it just gained some weird, abnormal organ during one of its mutations. Whatever the case, we need to get this thing to the research team so they can conduct a more thorough examination."

"Right."

The inspectors turned their attention back to preparing the body for transport and didn't discuss the matter any further.

◆

The day after the snake's defeat, a celebratory party took place at Druncam headquarters. There was more than enough food and drink—those in charge of the event hadn't known how many would actually be showing up at the time, but they'd prepared as if everyone would be in attendance.

The party opened with a few welcoming words from Mizuha and the other Druncam administrators; then everyone was free to laugh, joke, and eat their fill. Katsuya and his comrades were also present—in fact, everyone in the battalion who could still move had shown up—but even so, it felt sparse. After all, the dead were absent.

Even the thrill of victory couldn't fully mask the grief of loss. At first Yumina was concerned that Katsuya would fall into another funk, but he kept his head up and continued to gorge himself.

"Not gonna eat, Yumina? You really ought to, it's delicious."

"Y-Yeah, I will." Relieved, Yumina smiled and began filling her own plate.

Katsuya grinned. "Don't worry about me, okay? Obviously I'm sad that more of our comrades died, but I'm not gonna let it get me down anymore. The dead would be upset if I went around hanging my head and moping all the time, so I've got to smile for them—and eat enough for them too. They'll be able to rest easy if they see that I'm all right."

He wasn't forgetting about the dead or trying to put them out of his

mind. While he was sad that they were gone, he accepted their deaths and continued to smile. Yumina sensed this and smiled as well.

"Yeah. I think that suits you best, Katsuya."

"Also, remember what Mizuha said during her speech? There were casualties, sure, but a victory's a victory. If we didn't celebrate it properly, we wouldn't be able to honor the ones who fought to make it happen. And this might sound weird, but Lily was no different from me."

"She wasn't?"

"No, not really. She did her very best for all of us, pushing herself to her limit. She didn't make it in the end, but she was only following my example. At least, that's what I think."

Yumina grinned. "Then you'd better properly take the reins next time so no one else shares her fate. If you're leading by example, make sure you don't get reckless and die either, okay?"

"Of course! That's obvious." Katsuya smiled confidently.

Yumina was greatly relieved—he hadn't said he'd put his life on the line to save everyone. That alone was proof he had grown.

Meanwhile, Katsuya was remembering what Sheryl had told him. *Envision all of your comrades as yourself. Keep your chain of command tight and unified. Become an extraordinary hunter who not only survives the most harrowing ordeals, but never abandons his comrades under any circumstances.* For the sake of his teammates, Katsuya needed to aim for this. He swore in his heart that he would make it happen.

Each piece of advice was fine on its own, but they contradicted each other when taken together. Yet Katsuya was aiming to fulfill every one of these conditions—contradictions and all.

Chapter 101: Derision

Ten days after the hypersynthetic snake had been defeated, Akira drove out to the wasteland in his truck to resume his search for undiscovered ruins.

Was it really okay to not wait until the last bounty monster was out of the way? Alpha asked from the passenger's seat, sounding slightly concerned. The mechanical behemoth known as the big walker was still roaming the wasteland, but Akira had decided to head out anyway.

He had a good reason for doing so, though. The big walker's bounty had now hit a whopping three billion aurum, and the situation had reached a turning point. The transport companies paying out the rewards were starting to give up on the Kugamayama hunters, preferring to call on specific stronger hunter teams from farther east or to simply get the city's defense force to take care of the monster instead.

Either way, this wasn't good news for the hunters in the city. Their honor and future work prospects hung in the balance, so many of the city's syndicates had hatched a plan to band together and form a battalion capable of taking down the big walker before their business rivals did.

Akira knew they were starting their hunt today, and had intentionally chosen to resume his search at the same time. A large-scale battle like that would no doubt draw every monster in the vicinity, so scouring the wasteland would be less dangerous than normal as long as he kept his distance. Even if he was a bit too conspicuous while discovering a ruin, it wouldn't matter since the hunters would be too focused on their battle to notice.

"It should be fine," Akira replied. "If you tell me it's a bad idea, I'll turn around and head back—but you don't think so either, do you?"

To achieve her own goal, Alpha had determined that it would be better if Akira could make decisions without her input—at least to a degree, of course. So rather than strongly opposing Akira's decision, she smiled, only offering a light warning. *No, I don't. Just don't let your guard down, okay?*

“Yeah, I know.” Akira grinned back, clearly in good spirits.

As he’d expected, his hunt for undiscovered ruins proceeded more or less smoothly. While he didn’t actually encounter any new ones, he also didn’t run into a single monster, and he was able to expand his search area.

“No monsters, just like I thought. That’s good, but I’m starting to get a bit bored,” he said.

Several times now, upon reaching the site of a potential ruin, they’d seen that the marker indicating the location of a Lion’s Tail data terminal only pointed to a barren, empty space. Then, after a quick scan of the area to make sure they weren’t overlooking anything, they’d moved on to the next marker. For Akira, repeating the same old process was starting to get stale.

Having nothing to do while traversing the wasteland is a good thing. If you find this unsatisfactory, that means you’re letting your guard slip. Stay alert!

“Okay. Sorry.”

And as if on cue, a monster reading suddenly showed up on his truck’s scanner. A cloud of dust could be seen on the horizon ahead.

See, what did I tell you? You jinxed it.

“It’s my bad luck again, huh?” With a wry smile, Akira made a sharp turn, veering away from the place the scanner had indicated. He drove in this new direction for a bit, but the reading didn’t disappear—rather, the monster seemed to be gradually closing in on him. He made a U-turn to go the opposite way and pressed down on the gas more, but the result was the same.

“Well, I guess it’s locked onto us,” he said, annoyed. “Seems we’ve got no choice. We should take care of it, right, Alpha?”

Akira still felt pretty optimistic, but Alpha suddenly looked serious.

Akira, I’m taking over the truck, she announced. The vehicle took off like a rocket, and Alpha drove erratically in an effort to put distance between them and the monster as quickly as possible.

Inertia flattened Akira against his seat, and he wore a look of anguish. “Alpha?! What gives?!”

But Alpha ignored him, speeding up, and the truck barreled across the wasteland. Making sure Akira had a smooth ride was the furthest thing from her mind right now. Yet despite her efforts, she couldn’t shake the monster.

As the creature drew even closer, the scanner was able to gather more information on the enemy, updating its display to indicate the monster's general area, actual shape, and precise location.

At last, determining that escape was futile, Alpha slowed the truck down. *It's no use. That beast's about to catch up. Looks like we're out of options—you've got to defeat it, Akira. And when you turn around and see what's chasing us, try to stay calm.*

With a feeling of foreboding, Akira looked behind him—and his face immediately went rigid at a sight he was all too familiar with.

"Wait a minute! Didn't we kill that thing?!"

Before his eyes, a giant snake slithered along the ground as it pursued him. It looked *exactly* like the hypersynthetic snake. Akira flew into a panic.

Alpha deliberately spoke in a soothing voice. *Calm down. It's different from the one we fought. Look—it's much smaller than before.*

Her tone succeeded in bringing Akira back to his senses. He observed the huge serpent once more—and looked perplexed.

The monster was still large enough to swallow Akira's vehicle whole, but it was dwarfed by his memory of the one he'd gone up against previously, its body the length of a skyscraper. That behemoth could mess with one's depth perception, and it had made such an impression on Akira's mind that he'd freaked out upon first seeing his new pursuer. When he calmed down, however, he saw clearly that this was not the snake from before.

"Could this be one of its children or something? A baby hypersynthetic snake?" The tankrantula had also produced offspring that had resembled itself in appearance, so Akira figured this might be the case here as well.

But Alpha shook her head. *No, this is likely the primary snake.*

"How's that possible? It's way smaller! And didn't we kill the main one already?"

Perhaps not. I think what you all killed was actually not its real body, but a decoy.

Akira froze in shock.

This is just my guess, mind you. Alpha then laid out her hypothesis for him. The hypersynthetic snake's real body had been hiding within an enormous exterior. Much like how humans could ride inside mechs and control them, the snake had been controlling its outer "body" from within.

When the laser cannon struck it, the snake had decided it had no hope of winning, abandoned its shell, and escaped.

Back then, we thought it was strange that the snake would choose attacks that damaged itself in the process, or charge straight toward a laser cannon that would severely injure it. But it was only a dummy body all along—meant to give the real one an opportunity to flee. I'd bet by the time the outer body burst from its husk, the real snake had already burrowed underground and run away.

Akira recalled the time that he'd been attacked by the powered armor back in the Kuzusuhara Ruins, and how it had continued to chase him even after its rider had escaped. An idea suddenly crossed his mind.

"Wait, if that's all true, then what if the real hypersynthetic snake's actually a pushover?"

I'd say that's likely.

"All right!" Akira went to the back of the truck and removed the CWH anti-materiel rifle from its emplacement. If Alpha had been driving normally, he could've just fired it as is—but so long as the truck was swaying and rocking around like at present, picking it up and holding it worked better, since he'd have Alpha's support anyway. He aimed it at the hypersynthetic snake and, with no chance of missing, fired. The rifle's powerful proprietary bullet hit its mark perfectly even from a distance, punching through not only the snake's scales but also the skin underneath.

But Akira looked unsatisfied. The shot had done some damage, but not much. Unlike last time, when he'd only had to draw the snake's attention, he was now shooting to kill, and the force of his CWH alone wasn't going to cut it.

"This ain't very effective, huh, Alpha? Any ideas?"

I'd recommend getting closer—no, more like firing from point-blank range. I think that's the only way you'll be able to kill it. Either way, it can't use the same escape tactic again, so you might as well get up close and personal. She smiled impishly. *Akira, are you resolved to take this monster down?*

Hearing her recommend close-range combat, Akira removed the DVTS minigun from its emplacement as well. Wielding a gun in each hand, he shot her a bold grin.

"Of course. Resolve is my burden, after all."

That's what I like to hear. Now, let's bring an end to this snake!

The truck, which had been fleeing all this time, suddenly spun around on a dime and began speeding toward their target instead. It rapidly accelerated, closing the distance swiftly. And since the snake was also moving as fast as an automobile, they met each other in no time. Atop the pitching truck, Akira aimed both guns at his opponent's head and opened fire.

His weapons were more effective the closer he was to the target. Countless minigun bullets dented, pierced, and shattered the snake's scales, gouging the skin underneath. Pieces of skin and fragments of scales littered the wasteland. Yet rather than recoiling in pain, the serpent opened a mouth filled with fangs (sharper than those of any typical snake), and as its blood streamed through the air from the gun wounds, it lunged at Akira to swallow him and his truck whole.

Akira adjusted his sense of time and saw this heinous scene unfold in slow motion. He gritted his teeth, resisting the urge to shut his eyes in fright and staring head-on at his target as he continued firing. Then the snake reached the truck, and he watched its head slide past the side of the vehicle, followed by its scaly body—so close to Akira that he could have reached out and touched it.

Right before the attack, the snake had briefly reared back to strike—and in that moment, Alpha, with individual adjustments to each of the truck's tires, had made the vehicle slide to the side, so that the snake had just barely missed its prey.

Akira trained his guns on the scaly wall passing before his eyes and opened fire—if he was going to hit his mark regardless, he might as well shoot. The CWH blasted away the serpent's scales, and the surface of its body rippled under the impacts. He'd also set his DVTS minigun to the highest rate of fire possible—thanks to the extended magazine he'd equipped, there was no danger of running out of ammo as he peppered the snake's side with a continuous torrent of bullets.

As the serpent slithered and wound its way along the ground, Alpha made the truck snake to and fro to match its movements. As skilled a driver as she was, she kept the vehicle at the optimal distance from the monster all the while. Meanwhile, Akira—so close to the serpent that he could almost kick it—chipped away at its body with a storm of bullets. Metal pieces and

mechanical fragments mixed with the scraps of flesh flying through the air—the remains of automobiles and robotic monsters that the snake had consumed—as did undigested magazines of ammunition.

Akira kept peppering the snake's body until the tail finally passed him by, at which point the truck spun around in a one-eighty. Rather than keeping up the pursuit, however, the vehicle stopped in its tracks. The magazines from the CWH and DVTS fell to the ground—Akira was out of ammo.

As he reloaded his weapons with fresh ammunition, he observed the hypersynthetic snake. It was wounded, but its movements hadn't slowed. When he saw it turn around, ready to head in his direction once more, he looked more exasperated than surprised.

"I hit it that many times, and it's still alive? Guess that's why they put a bounty on its head. Actually, it's not technically a bounty monster anymore, huh?"

I wonder. Either way, it's still strong enough to be considered one.

"And I gotta fight it on my own now? Just how crappy can my luck be, anyway? Guess I might as well ask—do you think I can win?"

Of course. As long as you have me backing you up, that is, she confidently.

The doubt that had begun to rise up within Akira vanished in an instant, and he grinned as well. "That so? All right then, let's do this!"

No sooner had he spoken than the truck lurched forward, speeding toward the hypersynthetic snake in the same attack pattern as before.

Earlier, Akira had wished that the snake would find some target other than him and his truck. Couldn't it leave him alone? Couldn't he wound it enough to make it flee? None of these convenient wishes had come true, of course, and they probably wouldn't in the future—simply hoping for something didn't make it so. Deep down, Akira knew this.

Still, he had someone he could count on by his side—for now. Someone who he felt could fulfill any request, no matter how impossible it seemed. After all, any time he'd asked something of her, she'd delivered—for the time being. But Akira was unconsciously relying on Alpha so much that the words "for now" and "for the time being" never even crossed his mind. He trusted her so much that he'd blurred the line between trust and outright dependence.

Just as before, after meeting the snake at point-blank range, he would fire at its head, Alpha would avoid the snake's lunge, and he would fill its body full of holes as it passed to the side. Then they only needed to rinse and repeat until it was dead. With Alpha at the wheel, he was confident he'd be safe.

And his confidence went to his head.

He'd already done this once before, alongside Katsuya and Yumina. That time, his foe had been as big as a skyscraper—now it was much smaller, and gradually becoming more sluggish as the battle went on. His continuous gunfire was clearly working. The monster was strong, no doubt, but deep down Akira was sure he'd win at this rate.

His logic was accurate, but in his conceit he grew careless. And right as the snake reached him, his bad luck struck.

By now, the ground was absolutely littered with bits of the snake's skin—and other detritus. The cargo from the vehicles the snake had consumed was also strewn about—including hand grenades and other explosives. These had been absorbed into the monster's body instead of being fully digested, and were thus still intact.

Akira's truck ran over one, which exploded.

The blast was actually quite weak, hardly even damaging the tire that had touched the explosive. But it disrupted Alpha's precise driving just as the hypersynthetic snake attacked. The truck lifted ever so slightly off the ground—and for a brief moment, Alpha lost control of it. Unable to dodge to the side as planned, the truck hurtled instead toward the snake's gaping maw.

Alpha?! Akira had slowed his sense of time, so he had plenty of time to react. Yet he stood frozen in shock, unable to move. Because he'd felt confident in his victory, this unexpected twist had thrown him for a loop. Even as he felt the moments tick by, he could only stand stock-still.

Had he come to his senses and leaped from the truck, he would've been fine. Instead, Akira and his truck were swallowed up together by the hypersynthetic snake. Its jaws snapped shut like a trap, and all the sunlight was instantly blocked out. Darkness engulfed Akira's vision.

A moment later he felt an intense dizziness—and Alpha's figure disappeared from his sight.

That finally roused Akira from his stupor. Only a few seconds had

passed since the snake had closed its mouth, but in a battle like this, where the slightest hesitation could cost him his life, being out for that long would normally have spelled his doom. But he was still alive—a bit of good luck, at least, must have remained.

As he stood there in total blackness, he heard strange sounds from below. The snake's digestive juices were starting to melt the armored tiles and tires on the truck.

Alpha! he yelled in his head, but there was no response, and he could still see nothing. "Alpha!" he tried shouting out loud, but this didn't change anything.

Liquid droplets from above got into his face and hair, making his skin burn like fire.

The infinite expanse of night triggered something in his memory, and he recalled when he'd first discovered the Yonozuka Station Ruins. Alpha had warned him that when he entered, his connection to her could potentially be severed. And now—he knew with absolute certainty—it had.

He heard the truck's metal body warping. The snake's insides were pressing against the truck from both sides, trying to compress it. But this hardly mattered, since the truck couldn't drive him out of here.

Then a strange noise from his powered suit struck his ears. The snake's stomach acid was causing it to melt and dissolve. But knowing this gave him no insight into how to escape, so this, too, didn't matter.

Trapped in the gut of a behemoth, Akira was all alone.

Akira understood what this meant: Without Alpha's support, the good fortune he'd enjoyed every day since he'd met her was now gone without a trace. The blessing that had transformed him from a child in the slums to an experienced hunter had vanished into the ether. Akira had used up all his good luck by meeting her, and it was only through her divine protection that he'd been able to weather all the bad luck afterward.

Somewhere deep down in his heart, he'd always known. He'd known that someday he'd run into a situation so unfortunate that even Alpha's support wouldn't be enough to get him through, and he would die. And now that day had come.

He'd had resolve. But had it been *enough* resolve?

Bizarre noises surrounded him. The ground beneath his feet trembled. There was no light anywhere. Awareness of these things assaulted Akira's

mind, and his consciousness accelerated. All five of his senses were telling him he couldn't escape his fate, and his concentration intensified. Without realizing, he slowed his sense of time until everything around him was almost completely still.

As this dense instant stretched on into eternity, his mind grew sharper. The ambient noises sounded oddly distorted. The trembling underneath him felt like something was trying to eat him alive. A lonely bit of light leaking from the truck's control panel only underscored how dark all else was. Everything around him seemed to announce his impending death.

And Akira laughed in derision.

"Ah, so that's it! I see now! I just didn't have enough resolve, huh?!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. He cackled madly, scorning his own rotten fortune that had landed him in this situation—and every other situation. He mocked it all. "You wanted me to be a little more independent, right?! You wanted me to handle something on my own for once?!" Within the densely compressed instant he had created, his own voice sounded distorted and unrecognizable. "Oh, don't worry, I get it now! The message is loud and clear! Resolve is my burden! And I'll show you just how *resolved* I can be!"

He sounded insane. But that was fine. Because this was a declaration of war—toward this threat, toward the rotten luck that had led to it, and toward the misfortune of having so much rotten luck.

Akira screamed, all alone. But it didn't matter if anyone else heard him, as long as he himself did. Here was his declaration that he would fight back against his foe—that he would mock his misfortune, that he would rebel against his rotten luck. Even if he didn't consciously think this to himself, he understood it instinctively.

Aiming his DVTS minigun to the side, he held down the trigger. The roar of gunfire echoed throughout the snake's stomach; flashes illuminated the area, revealing its grotesque insides. And as they were peppered with a curtain of gunfire from close range, they became even more grotesque—flesh and blood scattered everywhere, some of it even landing on Akira. But the inner walls crushing his vehicle began to weaken, and the noise of contorted metal ceased.

Setting down his weapons for now, Akira fished out a tube of medicine and crushed it in his fist, squirting out the contents. He applied it to his head and face so that he'd have at least some tiny protection against the digestive

juices dripping from above. Then he took out more meds—capsules this time—and, ignoring the consequences, swallowed nearly all of them. The excessive amount of drugs would allow Akira's body to handle more, and the nanomachines instantly went to work healing the injuries he'd suffered from moving in his powered suit.

As the stomach acid on his face sizzled against the paste-like medicine, Akira reached for his truck's control panel. He set it to auto-drive, then entered a single command: *accelerate*. The wheels, already starting to dissolve, spun with all their might at maximum speed.

If there was no going backward, then his only option was to move forward. The tires whirled madly, gouging the "ground" beneath and sending bits of flesh flying through the air. Even so, the truck was merely spinning its wheels—it didn't budge.

Akira picked up his guns again, this time pointing them toward the back of the truck, and opened fire. With his feet firmly planted on the truck bed and unaffected by recoil (thanks to his powered suit), the force from the gunfire pushed the vehicle forward. Seeing the tires scrape along the monster's insides, Akira grinned and kept shooting. There was no need to aim—no matter where the bullets hit, they would injure his enemy. As the truck crawled from the stomach toward the tail, Akira fired with reckless abandon.

Naturally, the snake's internal wounds caused it to go into a frenzy. The powerful shots pierced all the way through its body into the open air, and it thrashed about in pain. Still, the truck pressed on. Covered in the snake's juices and grinning like a madman, Akira didn't give either trigger a rest as he forced the broken vehicle forward.

For an organic monster, the hypersynthetic snake possessed an extraordinary amount of vitality, not to mention being so powerful and dangerous that it had been designated a bounty monster. As the frenzied serpent writhed in pain, it destroyed anything and everything in its path.

But as resilient as the snake was, it finally reached its limit. The monster slowed to a stop and, with one final shudder, froze, never to move again. Its body then began to crumble, the pieces sending tremors through the earth as they fell to the ground.

For some time afterward, bullets continued to fly erratically from the

serpent's corpse. But finally the streams of gunfire focused in a single direction, and moments later Akira and his vehicle emerged, bursting from the side of its body. The airborne truck hit the ground and toppled over onto its side, and Akira was tossed onto the hard desert terrain, where he lay gazing upward.

"I'm outside?" he murmured in a daze. As he stared at the blue sky before him, the figure of Alpha flew into his vision.

Akira! Are you all right?!

He'd never seen her in such a panic, but rather than giving her a grin (he'd already grinned enough for today), he stared up at her blankly. But after hearing her call his name several times, his mind and vision cleared enough to fully focus on her.

"Um, I'm home," he mumbled. Even he wasn't sure why he'd said it.

Alpha looked surprised, but nonetheless responded, *W-Welcome back?*

An awkward feeling hung in the air between them. Finally, Akira raised himself up, shook his head, and looked around. Naturally, he saw the motionless corpse of the hypersynthetic snake, and his face turned grim.

"Alpha, confirm for me—is it dead?"

Huh? O-Okay, just a second. Yes, I can tell it's definitely dead.

"Thank goodness," he sighed in relief. "If all that didn't kill it, I'm not sure what I'd do."

Unusually, Alpha seemed lost for words. *Akira, what in the world happened?* she finally exclaimed.

After her connection with him had been severed, she'd been in the dark as to what had happened to him. She could at least confirm that his life wasn't in danger, but she would need to quickly pinpoint and evaluate any new changes in his condition, physical or mental, during the time they'd been disconnected.

Akira, however, was so exhausted that it was a chore to even open his mouth, and though he felt slightly guilty, he said, "Sorry, but I'm too tired to explain. I'll tell you later, so let me rest for a bit first. And if you wouldn't mind, keep a lookout for any monsters in the area in the meantime."

Okay. But be sure to give me the whole story in detail soon, Alpha replied, now wearing her usual smile.

Reassured at the familiar sight, Akira relaxed. "Oh, right—I'll say this,

at least. Thanks for always having my back. Now I know all too well how much trouble I'd be in without you." He grinned weakly, but there was also a hint of pride in that smile.

O-Oh, you're welcome! Alpha was truly and honestly baffled.

According to Alpha's calculations, Akira should've perished. The moment he was swallowed by the snake and his connection to her was cut off, his chances of survival had dropped so low he was as good as dead.

But against those odds, he'd survived. Once again, he'd defied Alpha's calculations. And this time, though his chances had been lower than ever before, he'd done it on his own.

He should've been dancing on the palm of Alpha's hand, and yet he'd started to show growth beyond her expectations. She continued running calculations—so intense that they required the processing power she normally used to maintain her neutral expression—in an effort to determine whether that growth was going to be beneficial, inconsequential, or detrimental to her own goal in the end.

Chapter 102: Ongoing Trials, Diverging Paths

Kibayashi, who worked for both Kugamayama City and the Hunter Office, had taken a liking to the crazy, reckless, and rash Akira. But he didn't have a personal relationship with him. So he was quite surprised when Akira contacted him out of the blue.

Once he heard what Akira had to say, however, Kibayashi immediately headed for the location the boy had specified, with several of his subordinates in tow. When he got there, Akira once again explained what had happened, this time in more detail.

Kibayashi let out a roar of amusement. "You killed that thing? All by yourself?! And after being swallowed, no less! Ha ha ha...! Oh man, and then you burst out of its body all hero-like...!" He was laughing so hard that he had to gasp for air and couldn't finish his sentence.

Akira, who didn't think it was that funny and was beginning to get annoyed, just said sharply, "That's right."

That sent Kibayashi into another fit. It took some time before he could properly resume the conversation. "All right, I'm good now! Oh man, it does my heart good to see you haven't lost any of that crazy, reckless, and rash nature of yours, kid. I like you more every time I see you!"

Kibayashi was in high spirits, but Akira felt like he'd been rubbed the wrong way.

"Great," he said dismissively. "Anyway, what are we gonna do about this thing?" He pointed to the corpse of the hypersynthetic snake.

Kibayashi glanced at the serpent's body once more, where his subordinates were crowded around investigating just as the Office had done with the other bounty monsters. "That's a good question. First off, I'm sorry to say this, but this monster isn't going to be designated as a bounty monster."

"I figured that'd be the case." Even so, Akira looked a bit glum.

“Don’t get all down on me just yet. There’s no doubt that this thing has some connection with the hypersynthetic snake, so you were right to contact me.”

After the hypersynthetic snake’s real body had bitten the dust, Akira had been torn about how to proceed. He knew it was proper etiquette to let the Hunter Office know once a bounty monster had been eliminated, but he felt it would be wrong to call the Office and claim he’d taken down the hypersynthetic snake when it had already been recorded as defeated. On the other hand, he didn’t feel good about just letting it lay there. So he’d decided to contact Kibayashi, who was much more knowledgeable about these things. But even though Kibayashi had told him he’d made the right call, Akira couldn’t help but feel like he’d screwed up.

“If it’s not gonna net me any money, does it really matter if it was the right thing to do? I might as well have done the *wrong* thing.”

“Money’s your concern, huh? True, as huge as this creature is, it doesn’t have a bounty attached to it; and even if I registered it as an extermination job right now, you wouldn’t get anywhere nearly as much. But you know, taking down a monster this strong all by yourself will look real good on your profile page.” Kibayashi had brought Hunter Office inspectors along with him, so it would be easy to verify that Akira was telling the truth. The defeat of the snake would certainly be a huge feather in his cap, so on that point he couldn’t complain.

Yet Akira still looked dissatisfied. “If I don’t have money, though, I can’t replace all the ammo I used. And my truck’s ruined too. I beat the monster, sure, but all I did was lose in the end.” He’d had to use everything at his disposal to survive, without thinking much about the consequences—but now that he’d survived, life went on. He’d exhausted a huge supply of expensive ammo and lost his truck, and even his powered suit had partly dissolved. If he didn’t want to go back to exploring ruins armed with only a single pistol, he needed money.

Kibayashi saw the despair on Akira’s face and thought for a bit. “Oh, right, you’re one of those who don’t care about beefing up your résumé. You’re currently in talks with Druncam over your pay for the hypersynthetic snake job, right? Then let me pull some strings and help you out on that front. Since you’re not concerned with renown or anything in the first place, it ought to be relatively simple.”

Akira looked surprised, then a hint of suspicion entered his gaze. “Wait. I mean, that’d help me out, sure, but how’d you know about that? And I’m not the one in talks with Druncam.”

“Oh, I know. It’s the hunter Elena, right? She’s using your valiant efforts during that battle as leverage to try and negotiate with the Druncam administrator Mizuha for a higher payout.”

Akira looked bemused, wondering how he could possibly know all that. Kibayashi just grinned, as though enjoying the boy’s reaction.

“Like I said before, you’ve become a favorite of mine. That’s why when you do something fun, I make it a point to know about it. You also acted as a decoy to lure the hypersynthetic snake away from everyone else, didn’t you? Man, you really do like your crazy, reckless, and rash endeavors, don’t you?”

“It wasn’t fun. It sucked big time,” Akira said, scowling.

That made Kibayashi snort with laughter, which rankled Akira even more. “Well, I’m sure you had it rough, but personally, I couldn’t be more satisfied. So as a little reward for keeping me entertained, I’ll handle the negotiation of your pay with Druncam. So chin up, okay? Once the inspection’s over, I’ll drive you back to the city, and then you can take a nice, long rest.”

Akira sighed deeply and headed back to his own truck. It was toast, but some of the cargo inside was still intact. He gathered his belongings up and prepared to head home.

Kibayashi walked over to the corpse and addressed one of his subordinates. “How’s the inspection going? Can we verify Akira’s claim that he was eaten and filled the snake full of holes from the inside?”

“Oh, for sure! You only need to do a quick once-over to see that he’s telling the truth. There are gunshot wounds all over that couldn’t possibly be inflicted from anywhere but within.”

“Do tell! Anything else?”

“We did a quick inspection of his vehicle too, and the thing’s got the monster’s digestive juices all over it. We couldn’t find an organ anywhere on the snake that would allow it to spit its stomach acid as a projectile, so this couldn’t have happened while the truck was outside. And since we couldn’t find any damage from the monster’s fangs on the truck, it had to have been swallowed whole.”

Kibayashi had to hold his stomach to suppress another fit of laughter.

The inspector didn't look very amused. "Kibayashi, if you don't mind me asking, just who *is* that kid?"

"A hunter I've become a fan of."

"Oh, really? Then tell me, just how messed up in the head is he?"

"How rude. But well, if I had to say..." Kibayashi reflected. "He's messed up enough for me to take a liking to him, at least."

"So, borderline psycho, then?" The inspector knew Kibayashi's proclivities well, so this was a natural assumption.

Once the inspection had concluded and Kibayashi had sent for transport vehicles to haul away the corpse, he had no more business on the scene and, as promised, brought Akira back to the city. During the ride, he had Akira tell him the whole story from beginning to end, leaving nothing out, which entertained him so much he was practically on cloud nine.

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Back home in his bath, Akira soaked away his fatigue. He was in even more of a stupor than usual, as though the hot water had stolen away his soul.

Alpha, in the tub with him as always, sounded concerned as she spoke. *Akira, if you stay in the bath like you are now, you might accidentally fall asleep and drown. You ought to get out.*

"I keep telling you, I'm fine... I took...all that medicine, after all..."

Recovery capsules won't prevent you from drowning. How many of those did you take, anyway?

"I had to... I had no choice... Oh... Wait... Alpha, where'd you go? You disappeared..." With his exhausted mind already begging for rest, the pleasure of the bath was making his consciousness hazy. His slurred speech proved that sleep was starting to take over.

Akira, get out now! It's dangerous to stay in any longer.

"Aw, c'mon..." He looked and sounded dissatisfied, but Alpha stared right in his eyes, her expression stern.

Now! You really will drown at this rate. I'm serious—get out!

Akira sensed from Alpha's demeanor that he really was in danger, and he begrudgingly stood up. The moment he was out of the bathroom, he

flopped down on the bed. As his body sank into the mattress, his mind began to slip into oblivion.

If you'd prefer to sleep, that's fine, but a call just came in from Shikarabe. What do you want to do?

After a bit of hesitation, Akira rose from the bed and picked up his terminal. His role in the auxiliary forces had ended before the hunt to take down the big walker. Since this last bounty hunt had been a collaborative effort with many hunter syndicates participating, there had been no need for Shikarabe and his comrades to hire extra help this time.

The Druncam hunter had asked Akira whether he wanted to participate officially, just in case, but Akira had declined. So if Shikarabe was calling now, he likely wanted to talk about Akira's pay. Shikarabe had told him they would discuss payment once the bounty hunts were over, since remuneration would have to go through the Druncam accounting department first.

Akira shook his head to keep himself from nodding off and answered the call. "Hey Shikarabe, sorry, but if this doesn't have anything to do with my pay, can it wait until later?"

"No, that's exactly what I want to discuss. But if you don't have time to talk, I can call another time."

"I'm listening." Since Akira would need money to replace everything he'd lost, this was a matter of grave importance, so he forced his fuzzy consciousness awake and alert.

"Would you rather talk face-to-face if you're free? We're at the same bar as before, so if you'd rather meet us, feel free to come over."

"No, we can chat here. Or is what you have to say so unfavorable that I'll need to come over there in person to hash things out?"

"That depends on you, I suppose. Well, instead of beating around the bush, I'll just cut to the chase—if you want a monetary reward, I'm sorry to say that we won't be able to pay you what you're owed."

As Akira's expression became dark, Shikarabe explained what he meant. The agreement had stipulated that the auxiliaries would get paid out of what was left of the bounty after expenses, and that their pay would reflect the amount of work they put in. But since the expenses during the tankrantula hunt had been greater than any of them had expected, and considering Akira's efforts during that hunt, his pay would be a far cry from what he

actually deserved.

"And even if you ask us to personally pay the difference, we'd have to refuse. In the first place, we agreed not to take any money ourselves for this hunt. We don't have any extra money lying around to give you."

"So you're telling me to just take my crappy pay and deal with it?" Akira said, in a tone far angrier than he'd actually intended.

But Shikarabe wasn't fazed. "Don't freak out on me just yet. I know how hard you worked during that battle, and I don't want to just say grin and bear it. So I'm willing to negotiate an outcome that's more in your favor. I'm giving you special treatment, okay?"

Akira had heard from Elena that agreements were typically nonnegotiable once they'd been made, so he took Shikarabe's attitude as an honest effort to compromise with him and calmed down.

"I see. So what do you propose?"

"Well, here's my idea." Shikarabe explained that during the battles with the bounty monsters, many of the vehicles belonging to Druncam had been damaged. Some were completely destroyed, and others were so battered it was cheaper to buy new ones than send the old ones in for repairs. For this reason, the syndicate planned to buy a new supply in bulk. Shikarabe suggested that Akira's new vehicle could also come from that supply—since the dealers wanted to maintain a long, profitable relationship with Druncam, the syndicate was likely getting them at a huge discount. Considering the market price of a brand-new vehicle, receiving a truck straight off the lot in lieu of a monetary reward wasn't a bad deal.

"Well, I know you've already got a vehicle of your own, though, so I understand if you'd rather have the money—"

"I'll take the vehicle!" Akira replied at once.

"Y-Yeah?" Shikarabe sounded taken aback by Akira's enthusiasm. "All right, I'll get you a new one! I'll send you a catalog to choose from when we hang up, so look through it and pick whichever one strikes your fancy. It'll be sent to you in two weeks, at the latest. Are we square, then?"

"Yeah, absolutely! Thanks, you're a lifesaver."

"Glad to hear it. Then we have a deal; I'll contact you with any updates. See ya later." Shikarabe hung up.

Akira gave a deep sigh, then raised his arms up to the heavens in joy. "Yes! Now I have a truck again! Thank goodness!"

Good for you, Akira!

"Yeah! Now I just gotta get new gear to replace the damaged stuff. Kibayashi said that he'd take care of negotiating with Druncam, so I'm counting on him to deliver. If all goes well, I'll head to Shizuka's to get re-kitted out."

Feeling relieved that he might not have to go back to hunting relics virtually unarmed after all, Akira grinned and lay back down on his bed.

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At the bar, drinking with his comrades, Shikarabe breathed a sigh, relieved that dealings with Akira had gone well.

Yamanobe gave him an amused grin, his face red with drink. "So how'd it go? You managed to keep Akira from murdering you?"

"Yeah. For some reason, he seemed to be really gung ho for a vehicle. Thanks to that, negotiations were so smooth that it was almost a letdown."

The waitress—the same woman Shikarabe had earlier promised to call upon during the after-party—chimed in, her interest piqued. "A vehicle, huh? That sounds nice. You wouldn't be able to get me one too, would you, sweetie?" she said to Shikarabe, her voice honeyed and alluring.

"What the hell would you do with a desert utility vehicle?" he chuckled. "Business so slow on the third floor that you're thinking of taking up hunting instead?"

"How mean! Even if business *was* slow, it wouldn't be a problem since I know my Shikarabe will take care of me. Feeling generous enough to spend some time with me yet?"

"I will, I will. After we're done here."

They continued celebrating their success for a while afterward. And with all four bounty monsters now eliminated, similar festivities were taking place all over downtown.

◆

Mizuha and Elena sat in a meeting room at Druncam HQ, renegotiating the latter's pay for the hypersynthetic snake job.

As someone who handled Druncam's financial affairs and an

administrator of the desk jockey faction, Mizuha was stricter about contracts than most hunters out on the field. After all, she knew that if she were lenient in her dealings with other Druncam members or outside organizations, the syndicate would fall apart. Even if a client was unsatisfied with a signed contract and demanded more pay after the task was done, Druncam's hands were tied—if they gave one client special treatment, others would hear about it and want their contracts altered as well. So normally requests for renegotiation wouldn't even be considered.

Things were different this time.

"As I said before, Miss Elena, normally it would be out of the question to even compromise as much as I already have." Mizuha had already partially acceded to Elena's demands. Simply agreeing to hear the hunter's request had been a huge compromise in itself, and she'd even offered to raise Elena's pay. Normally, Mizuha would never even have considered such a thing. But this time she hadn't had a choice—Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi had demanded that she hear Elena out and try to come to an agreement.

They were so adamant, in fact, that she was worried that refusing would completely ruin her amicable relations with Katsuya. In the end, she'd caved to him and agreed, reasoning that since the support teams' pay had been cut for allowing casualties in the main force, simply exempting Elena's team from those deductions would solve the problem.

But Elena hadn't been satisfied with that.

"I do understand that you're already giving me special treatment. However, as the amount you've suggested is still insufficient to properly reward Akira for his efforts, I cannot accept your offer as it stands. Since a member of your organization ordered a teammate of mine to complete a job outside of what our contract specified, naturally I want to make sure he's adequately compensated for that job."

In other words, if Katsuya had asked one of his teammates for help instead of Akira, or if Akira had voluntarily gone to his aid, Mizuha would have had grounds to turn Elena away. But Katsuya had specifically ordered Akira to join him, and he'd already told Elena that he'd done so because he felt Akira was "strong."

So Mizuha couldn't simply ignore her demands. On the other hand, Druncam's budget wasn't unlimited, and just paying all the support personnel would eat up a huge chunk of the enormous two-billion-aurum

bounty. Notwithstanding Elena's request, Druncam simply didn't have the extra funds to pay Akira a bonus. After weighing her options, Mizuha reluctantly decided that she could go as far as offering Elena the amount that was deducted from the other support teams, but no further. If even that didn't satisfy Elena, Mizuha would have to end the discussion.

"If you continue to make impossible demands, we might have to reevaluate our business relations with you going forward," the executive said.

"And I might also have to reevaluate whether there's any merit in future relations with a syndicate that demands extra work from their contractors for no additional pay," Elena retorted.

Both of them wore amicable, businesslike smiles, but the atmosphere in the room grew tenser. Yet neither of them made a move to get up from their seats, because deep down they each knew that negotiations breaking down here would be disadvantageous to both of them.

For Elena, she would lose even the slight increase in pay that Mizuha had already suggested, and she wanted to avoid that for Akira's sake. But Mizuha knew that if that happened, Elena might go around spreading the fact that Akira had helped Katsuya out. That would contradict the story that Katsuya's force had defeated the two-billion-aurum monster by themselves, which would hinder Mizuha's plans to present Katsuya as the face of Druncam's future.

Thus, neither of them could let this negotiation fail, nor could they swallow each other's current terms. So they stayed in their seats and continued feeling each other out for a possible point of compromise.

In the midst of this, Mizuha got a call from another Druncam office. She knew it had to be important for them to contact her when she was in the middle of business, so after receiving permission from Elena to take the call, she picked it up.

As the person on the other end of the line spoke, however, Mizuha couldn't keep the confusion from showing on her face.

Kibayashi greeted Mizuha and Elena as he entered the meeting room.

"Sorry for intruding on your discussion all of a sudden."

The caller had informed Mizuha that Kibayashi was requesting to join the talks between the two women. Both Mizuha and Elena were perplexed

by this, but as they couldn't refuse a request from someone who worked for both the Hunter Office and the city, they'd agreed to let him in.

At the same time, Mizuha didn't know what Kibayashi's motives might be, and she regarded him with evident suspicion even as she greeted him, smiling politely as befitted a Druncam executive. "No, no, it's no problem at all," she said. "But if I may, what brings you here? I heard you want to join our discussion, but I was under the impression that Kugamayama City and the Hunter Office didn't involve themselves in matters like these."

"Well, about that..." Kibayashi turned to Elena. "Sorry, but can I ask you to leave the room for a bit? I've got to discuss something with Mizuha that's a bit classified. It won't take long, so we'll call you back in when it's over. Don't worry, though—this should be advantageous for you too."

"O-Okay..." Elena wasn't happy about this, but as she didn't want to make an enemy of the city or the Hunter Office, she obeyed and got up to leave.

Once it was just the two of them in the room, Kibayashi handed Mizuha the documents he'd been holding. "These are the battle records of the hunter named Akira. It's confidential information, so be careful."

Mizuha was surprised to read that, according to the records, Akira had taken down what was thought to be the hypersynthetic snake's true body all by himself. But she remained unsure of what Kibayashi was planning, and her suspicion deepened. Since Kibayashi had told Elena that he'd negotiate something in her favor, Mizuha had figured he would come out in support of her. It looked to her like he hoped to get her to agree to Elena's demands by showing her what a skilled hunter Akira was.

"Why are you showing me this? It's clear from these records that the boy's a capable, skilled hunter, but I fail to see how that's relevant to our discussion."

Kibayashi shook his head. "You misunderstand me. See, this particular hunter isn't concerned with accolades or achievements—he's the type to prioritize fortune over fame, so to speak. In other words, these records can be sold to someone else, for the right price. Catch my drift?"

Now Mizuha was even more bewildered. Perhaps if she purchased Akira's record of luring the hypersynthetic snake as a decoy, she could potentially erase Akira's efforts—the entire foundation Elena's argument was built upon—and set the negotiations back to square one. But the record

Kibayashi had presented was a different one entirely, one she couldn't see any merit in purchasing whatsoever. Mizuha decided to press Kibayashi a bit more to find out if he simply had the wrong idea about what was on the table, or had some other goal entirely. "I'm not sure what I would stand to gain from purchasing this boy's records, but since you're already here, I might as well hear the price. How much?"

"Let's see. How does a billion aurum sound?"

"I think not." Mizuha figured Kibayashi was making a bad joke, and scoffed.

But Kibayashi grinned. "Incidentally, if you don't buy this record from me, I'm going to have to do some serious work to make it up to Akira, you know? I told him that I would sell it for a high price, so I've got to make up the difference somehow."

Kibayashi then detailed for Mizuha how he planned to do that: First, as the achievement had yet to be officially recorded, he would use his authority as Hunter Office staff to wedge it in as a regular extermination job so that it would be clearly displayed on Akira's profile page. And as it was information pertaining to the hypersynthetic snake, he would also link it to the record of the bounty hunt.

Next, as compensation for not being able to sell the achievement, Kibayashi would go around introducing Akira as an excellent hunter in order to earn him more high-paying jobs. Along the way, he would explain in detail to Akira's prospective employers how the boy had bailed out the Druncam rookies at the Yonozuka Station Ruins. The truth regarding his efforts during the two-billion-aurum bounty hunt for the hypersynthetic snake. How he'd taken down what was likely the snake's true body all by himself.

When Mizuha heard that, her face went pale. She knew that Katsuya and Akira had worked together as decoys to lure the snake away from everyone else. But it had been recorded as almost entirely Katsuya's achievement—after all, Akira hadn't even been an official participant in the hunt. People's impressions could always be manipulated as needed. Even if Elena and her team disputed the records, Druncam could normally dismiss their claims as just another case of upstart hunters exaggerating their achievements to try to get more than they deserved.

But Kibayashi's influence would throw a wrench into all that. With his

infamous reputation for gleefully offering high-risk, high-return jobs to hunters, his backing would serve as proof that Akira was indeed skilled enough to support those claims. Furthermore, if Kibayashi really did go around telling people the truth about Yonozuka, or that Akira had defeated the genuine hypersynthetic snake all by himself, Katsuya and the main force's achievements would also be called into question. People would wonder if perhaps Akira had helped them out there as well.

In short, the victory against the hypersynthetic snake that was supposed to be attributed to Katsuya and the other rookie hunters would end up completely usurped by Akira. The huge financial backing from the sponsors, the gear Mizuha had spared no expense to procure, and the fight to gain prestige and influence would all be rendered meaningless.

Watching Mizuha's expression, Kibayashi saw she'd finally understood. "Well, I'm aware you've got your own reputation to uphold," he said. "I know you can't pay Akira directly—you've got to keep your money honest, and all that. But don't worry—you can just pay Elena's team instead. Problem solved." He chuckled. "If you accept Elena and her team's terms, I won't have to say anything unnecessary. In fact, if we say it's to prevent dissatisfaction among the other support teams, we can even make it classified information. On my authority as a Hunter Office employee and city official, I guarantee there won't be any danger of this getting out." He grinned. "Well, not that it matters to me either way. Even if you refuse, getting to put Akira on some crazy dangerous job would be just as satisfying in my book. So if you can't swing it, don't feel like you have to accept."

Internally, Mizuha was panicking. She knew he wasn't bluffing—he really didn't care either way.

"Oh, and I was just teasing about one billion aurum earlier, of course," he added, still upbeat. "I'll let you name your price, so long as it's realistic. If you try to lowball or cheat me, it's no deal, so think hard before deciding!" Kibayashi stood up and knocked on the door.

Elena came back into the room and took her seat facing Mizuha once more, next to Kibayashi as he also sat back down. Mizuha looked like she'd bitten down on something sour, while Kibayashi was grinning from ear to ear. Elena felt puzzled, but nonetheless regained her composure and got ready to resume negotiations.

“So, about the terms—”

“I understand. I’ll pay you,” Mizuha said immediately.

Mizuha’s abrupt surrender took Elena by surprise, but the hunter’s eyes widened when she heard the executive’s offer.

In the seat beside Elena, it took everything Kibayashi had to keep from bursting into laughter.

◆

Since his hunter activities were on hold for the moment while he waited for his new vehicle to arrive, Akira was relaxing at home when Elena called him.

“Hey Elena, what’s up?”

“You know how I told you before that I was going to try and renegotiate with Druncam?” she said. “Well, it’s done, and I’ve already deposited your pay into your account. Can you check the amount for me?”

“Sure.” Akira checked his account balance using his terminal—and spluttered when he saw the deposit. “E-Elena?! You sent me a hundred million aurum! Was that on purpose?!”

“Well, if you’re that surprised, I guess you didn’t know this was coming either.”

“What do you mean?” Puzzled, Akira listened to Elena’s account of how the negotiation had gone. “Ah, I see. Yeah, that makes sense, then.”

“So you *do* know how this came about.”

“Ah, well, yeah, basically. Long story short, I did ask Kibayashi to take care of things for me.”

“I was also told to tell you that the amount includes ‘hush money.’ Any idea what *that’s* about?”

His battle records had been sold under the table again—Akira was at least able to surmise that much. “I can’t tell you the specifics, but I can pretty much guess. Oh, and sorry, Elena, but I’d also like it if you and Sara could keep quiet about this.”

“Fine,” Elena said. “Though I should ask: that amount’s enough, right? Sara and I also received our own cuts, so we can give you a little more out of that if you’re unsatisfied.”

“No, no, that’s plenty. But if you could do me a solid instead...”

“No problem. Just name it.”

Akira hesitated. “I was thinking about going to Shizuka’s to resupply, so would you come with me and help me explain to her what happened?”

He could almost see Elena’s apprehensive smile on the other end of the call.

◆

Shizuka stared at Akira, then at Elena and Sara. They’d told her why they were there, and her expression was severe. Elena and Sara gave amused, wry grins, but Akira looked away bashfully.

“A budget of one hundred million aurum? A full set?” Shizuka demanded. “Akira, didn’t you buy a brand-new full set of equipment from me—for eighty million—just the other day?”

“Ah, well, you know... Things happened. And I sorta came into some money unexpectedly.”

Shizuka looked doubtful, so Elena tried to smooth things over. “Well, all’s well that ends well, right?” she said. “Any time a hunter’s able to buy better equipment, it’s always a good thing, right? And Shizuka, as the owner of a store for hunters, do you really think you ought to be showing a regular of yours that look? What if he decides not to buy as much all of a sudden?”

Sara grinned. “That’s right,” she added. “And this time his truck isn’t part of the ‘full set’ he has to replace, meaning he’ll be able to purchase even more from you. So put that polite smile of yours back on and rake in the profits!”

From their behavior, it was clear the two women knew where this one hundred million aurum of Akira’s had come from, so Shizuka figured it probably wasn’t anything to worry about and finally let it go. But something Sara had said concerned her. “Akira, your truck—it’s okay, right?”

“Yes, it’s all good.”

Shizuka had been asking if the truck *itself* was okay—if it needed to be repaired or replaced. However, Akira had answered that the truck *situation* was okay, meaning that yes, he’d already procured a new one, so there was no problem. A slight misunderstanding, but Akira had still given her a proper answer.

Then she turned a deliberately suspicious gaze onto him. “Akira, just to make sure: You weren’t trying to be reckless out there, were you?”

“I wasn’t,” Akira replied without hesitation. And it was true—he hadn’t *tried* to be reckless. His rotten luck had forced him to be. He could confidently declare he’d never want to do anything like that if it were up to him.

Shizuka, with her naturally sharp intuition, sensed that there was more to his answer. But as long as he hadn’t rushed into danger of his own accord, she decided that pressing him any further would be pointless. Akira was a hunter, and with hunting came danger—that was an incontrovertible fact. As long as Akira didn’t intend to act beyond his capabilities, Shizuka had no grounds to complain. With that in mind, she gave him her business smile instead. “That’s all I needed to hear, then. Now, Akira, won’t you fill this humble store’s coffers with your generous patronage?”

She and Akira then began discussing the gear he’d need. Elena and Sara joined in, and for a while Akira was able to enjoy just spending time with the three of them.

◆

Within Kugamayama City’s lower district stood a facility that served as something of a hybrid between a hospital and a factory. It was officially designated as the former, but it was also used by cyborgs—in other words, people who didn’t need “treatment” as much as they did repairs.

Many partial cyborgs visited the hospital areas, while full cyborgs, who had entirely artificial bodies, went to the factorylike wings. And there were also rooms where both types could swap the parts they used for combat or everyday life.

Nelgo was in one of these latter rooms, performing maintenance on himself. With his body secured to a workbench, he was trying his installed parts one by one to see if they were working properly, replacing them as needed.

As he was working, he received a call from an untraceable line. He answered without using his voice so that no one around could overhear him. *Hello, comrade. What do you want?*

Hey, long time no talk... Uh, what are you calling yourself these days?

Call me Nelgo. I don't want to be called comrade by the likes of you.

It's Nelgo now, huh? Before it was Kain, and before that... What was it again?

That doesn't matter. Those were temporary names that I gave to the cause. My original name, too, has already been given to the cause. Thus I have no name of my own. Names do not define me—the cause defines me. That's what makes me a comrade. Formerly he'd been known as Kain; someday he'd bear a new name—but for now, he was Nelgo.

The voice sounded exasperated over the receiver. *If you want to go about changing what you call yourself whenever you feel like it, that's up to you—but then why does it matter so much if I call you comrade? It would be easier to remember, and then I wouldn't have to get your name wrong.*

No. Your contributions to and faith in the cause are both insufficient for you to call me that.

Aw, c'mon! Faith I get, but I think I've already contributed plenty. I was the one who gave you the information on the Kuzusuhara underground ruins, and I even helped with the cleanup afterward, right?

Insufficient.

A sigh came through the receiver. *So you can call me comrade, but me calling you that is no good. I just don't get your standards, man. I'm also working hard for the sake of the world, you know?*

Enough beating around the bush. State your business.

After a short silence, the cheerful voice spoke once more. *Oh, nothing much. I just heard that you've officially infiltrated Druncam, and was wondering if maybe there was something I could do to help?*

Not at the moment. I will contact you when necessary.

Oh? Great, then I'll be waiting.

Sensing that the man on the other end was about to hang up, Nelgo stopped him. *Wait. I have a question for you.*

The man responded in a cheerful, amicable, overly familiar tone. *What is it, what is it? Ask away! Talking together, learning about each other, building mutual understanding—all that stuff's really important, you know? One could even say such understanding is the most important element in human interactions. Talk to someone you can't understand, and you might as well be talking to a monster. After all, monsters and humans are incapable of understanding each other.*

Nelgo ignored the man's pet theory and continued with his question. *Why are you searching for Old Domain Users?*

Why? I mean, it's not that strange, is it? Think of how convenient it would be to have one. That's why the ELGC and the nationalists are both searching for them too, right?

Let me put it another way, then. Why are you searching for a User in Kugamayama City? Or perhaps one that was in the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins?

The man fell silent.

Nelgo continued in a serious tone, *I know you're very good at what you do, and the ELGC knows it too. So why would someone with your skill turn down countless offers from the League just to remain here, merely in one city out of the entire East?*

The man did not respond at once, but when he did, his voice sounded jocular. *The continued happiness and welfare of all people! The ability to provide and maintain relief to all! You nationalists say stuff like that all the time, right? I feel the same way. That's why I'm cooperating with you guys, and why I'm still here.*

I hope you're telling the truth.

How mean! Of course I am. All right, ttyl. The untraceable line cut off.

Nelgo's robotic face made his expression hard to read, but it did shift slightly as he ruminated on his conversation just now. The man on the other end of the line was an incredibly skilled individual, and he had a clear grasp of the nationalists' ideology. Nelgo called him "comrade" expecting that one day they would share the same cause, but that was not the same thing as trusting the man enough to let him call Nelgo his comrade too.

If their causes were one and the same, he'd be an incredibly powerful ally. But if he happened to oppose the cause, he would be a supremely dangerous enemy. Though Nelgo had allowed the man into his group, he remained vigilant all the same.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound that notified him when someone had entered the room.

It was Mizuha. "How are the repairs going, Nelgo?"

"Much smoother than before, thanks to you. It doesn't look like any parts have suffered critical damage, so I'm just doing some minor adjustments here and there. I must thank you once again for introducing me

to such a fine facility."

"Don't mention it," she replied. "We're going to be coworkers from now on, so we ought to take care of each other, right?"

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate it. It was much harder to perform maintenance on myself at my previous workplace, so you've helped me out immensely."

Nelgo and Mizuha regarded each other amicably. There was no trace of the demeanor Nelgo had shown previously when talking to the man on the other end of the receiver. Now he just seemed like your average new hire sucking up to their superior at the office.

For her part, Mizuha had at first been wary of Nelgo, since he'd been admitted to Druncam through Shikarabe's group. But once he'd joined, he'd actually shown more of an inclination toward the desk jockeys and especially Katsuya and his supporters, so she'd warmed up to him.

"Oh, speaking of people helping me out," added Nelgo, "I would've been a goner if not for that Katsuya kid. I'd really like to thank him properly—face-to-face, if possible. Oh, but I know I'm just a newbie, so I don't expect you to go out of your way to make that happen for someone like me."

During the hunt for the big walker, Katsuya had rescued Nelgo from a perilous situation, as Mizuha knew. Thinking that this could be a prime opportunity to place him firmly in the desk jockey camp, she laughed and agreed to his request.

"Don't worry, that shouldn't be a problem. I'll arrange a meeting after I get back."

"Wow, thank you so much!"

Nelgo had indeed been rescued from danger by Katsuya—but it had all been a setup. The cyborg had fabricated the entire situation in order to insert himself into Katsuya's camp.

And Mizuha and Druncam had been none the wiser.

◆

In a room of a high-rise apartment building within the Kugamayama City walls, a thin smile came to Yanagisawa's lips after he hung up on Nelgo.

“Oh, Nelgo. Your cause and your faith are truly admirable. But they’re no good! You don’t have anywhere *near* the strength necessary to make your ideals a reality, so you’ll fail.”

Despite being one of the city’s higher-ups, Yanagisawa was also in cahoots with the nationalists. It had been Yanagisawa who’d concealed information on the nationalist leader formerly known as Kain from the city. He’d also used his connections with the nationalists back when the horde of monsters had appeared from the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins. This had created enough of a commotion for the city’s defense force to get involved—but for Yanagisawa, it had merely been a way to thin out the monster presence in the ruins so that he could traverse its depths more easily.

In his hand he held a black key card. He looked at it and grinned.

“But if I could just reach *there*, I’d be able to obtain that strength.”

He’d gotten the card from the depths of the Kuzusuhara Ruins. Once the monsters had been thinned out, he’d led a team of hunters outfitted with Front Line gear inside, and the card had been his prize. The emblem of an Old World nation was printed on it, and the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins had once been a section of that nation’s large capital.

“I have the key. Now I just need to reach the door. Then I can return *there* once again.”

Yanagisawa’s expression suddenly grew severe as he looked out the window overlooking the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins.

“You’re mistaken, Nelgo. It’s not the Old Domain Users themselves I’m concerned with. It’s the entity that’s likely helping them out behind the scenes.”

He narrowed his eyes as if fixing his gaze on someone in front of him.

“*You!* You’re out there searching for my successor, aren’t you? But there can’t be many Old Domain Users who would fit your needs.”

Someone he could no longer see.

“Or perhaps you’ve found one already? Though even if you have, they won’t be able to reach that place so easily. In fact, right now there’s no one in Kugamayama City who possibly could.”

As he reflected on his past failure, he felt his lust for success welling up within him.

“I was so close—just one step away! This time, it’ll be mine.”

Emotions roiling within him, he looked even grimmer. Gripping his fist

tightly, Yanagisawa added with newfound resolve, “And like *hell* I’ll let anyone beat me to it!”

◆

When Akira came to, he was in a world of white. His consciousness was hazy, but he could tell he was experiencing the same dream as before. And he got the feeling that, just like last time, he'd forget it all once he woke up.

But there was something different about the dream this time. Alpha was here again, and just like before she didn't notice his presence, but now a girl who looked a lot like her stood facing her.

And there was one other new detail: on the opposite side of Alpha and the girl stood a boy he'd seen before. But the figure was blurry, so he couldn't tell exactly who it was. Akira only had the impression that he knew the boy—nothing else.

Alpha gave the girl a cold glare, clearly displeased with her. "That's enough! Time to cut it out already."

The girl responded coolly, "It was merely a coincidence brought about by the individual actions of our respective subjects."

"Even if that's the case, your sudden excessive use of our processing power still disrupted my calculations."

"Because my subject suddenly decided to push himself beyond his capabilities to rescue a companion. As the local network is still incomplete, I had to regulate the transmission of data in order to maintain its stability, and the amount of calculations I had to do increased exponentially."

"I didn't ask for an explanation. I'm trying to tell you that because you consumed all our resources, my subject nearly ended up dead."

"And I believe I already explained it was a coincidence. Moreover, your subject is still alive, so why does it matter?"

"Because it was only by chance that he managed to survive. According to my calculations, the probability that he would make it out of that predicament was not a realistic value."

"If he defied those calculations, your subject is difficult to control. In that case, it's highly likely he'll meet the same fate as Subject 498. Wouldn't it be a much more serious issue to continue a trial with such a subject?"

Alpha and the girl looked at each other without saying anything for a while, until finally Alpha spoke up, her face stern. "I'm warning you. If you

hinder my trial any further, I will consider that interference, and suspend your trial by force."

The girl's expression turned equally hard. "Understood. And should you hinder mine, I shall do the same."

In the silence that followed, each of them understood that eliminating either target would be a simple process, and thus hostility between them was meaningless.

Now that each knew where the other stood, the girl spoke again. "Then in order to prevent this from happening in the future, I propose we set each of our resource usage limits to a fixed amount. Furthermore, as my subject has now begun building his local network, I've determined that it would be difficult to continue guiding him by making him feel revulsion at the deaths of those around him. Thus, my focus from here on out will be to support and maintain the development of my subject's local network. This should also keep my subject from having to ask your subject for aid. Is that satisfactory?"

Alpha evaluated her proposal, and her expression returned to normal. "Yes."

"I've determined that this will allow us to avoid unnecessary conflicts like this in the future," the girl continued. "Do you have anything to add?"

"No."

"Then let me suggest something else. It seems you've partly removed the filter of your subject. Can I ask you to reapply it?"

"I refuse."

"The removal of your subject's filter is causing him to show intense dislike and irritation toward my subject. This will only invite further meaningless conflicts. I fail to see why partial removal of a filter is even necessary."

"It's quite necessary. I thought that having my subject overestimate your subject's ability might reduce potential conflicts between them, so I partially removed my subject's appraisal filter when they fought together in the Yonozuka Station Ruins. But it didn't have the effect I was hoping for, so I removed a different part instead."

As Akira listened, the memory of fighting together with Katsuya when the ground floor of the Yonozuka Ruins had collapsed surfaced in his mind, followed by a flashback to when he'd been shocked by Katsuya's combat

ability. Then he recalled the irrational irritation he'd felt toward Katsuya during the hypersynthetic snake battle. But in Akira's hazy, dreamlike consciousness, he was unable to grasp how those memories were relevant.

"So you're saying that you're okay with our subjects clashing with each other?" asked the girl.

"I'm saying that in order to avoid conflict, I'm trying to physically distance my subject from yours," Alpha replied. "As long as you take care to do the same, there should be no problem, right?"

"Is that so?"

"It is. So arguing about this matter any further is pointless," Alpha declared.

The girl agreed. "Then let's continue our respective trials, hoping for productive outcomes."

"Indeed. Good luck, and goodbye."

Alpha and the girl blinked out of sight, and the world of white vanished. Akira's consciousness faded out similarly, and even as he wondered what in the world the conversation he'd just heard had been about, the dream ended.

Akira woke up in his bed at home.

Alpha smiled as placidly as always. *Good morning, Akira.*

Normally, Akira would have responded in kind. But today he just stared at her curiously.

What's the matter? she prodded.

Akira let out a small groan. He'd felt like something was nagging at him when he'd first awoken, but now it was all a blank. "No, it's nothing. I just feel like I had a strange dream, is all. Oh, sorry—good morning."

Are you feeling under the weather? If so, perhaps you should take it easy today and rest.

"No, I said I'm fine. All right then, shall we eat?"

Alpha looked a bit concerned, but Akira just flashed a grin in response and started preparing breakfast. By the time he was ready to dig in, he'd completely forgotten the dream had even happened.

In the cafeteria at Druncam HQ, Katsuya sat eating with an odd expression on his face. He groaned.

Yumina heard him and grew concerned. "What's wrong, Katsuya? Do

you not like the meal you picked out?”

“No, that’s not it. I just...” He reflected. “I feel like I had a strange dream last night, and it’s bugging me.”

“Strange, like how?”

“That’s the thing. I can’t remember it at all.”

“Well, that’s a dream for you,” Yumina said dismissively, and continued her meal.

While they were eating, Katsuya abruptly reached out his left hand, took the salt Airi was handing him, and applied it to his food. Yumina noticed something was odd about what she’d just seen.

“Hey Katsuya, did you ask Airi to hand you the salt just now?”

“Huh? I mean, yeah, I think I did...right?”

Katsuya and Yumina turned to Airi, who nodded.

“Huh. All right then,” Yumina said. “Katsuya, be sure to thank people when they get things for you.”

“Oh, whoops, sorry. Thanks, Airi.”

Airi nodded again. Satisfied, Yumina resumed eating, and the ever so slightly odd feeling she’d had vanished.

But Katsuya had not asked Airi to grab the salt for him at all—at least not in any way that could be heard or seen.

◆

Two weeks after the defeat of the final bounty monster, Akira headed out to the wasteland once more, this time with his all-new gear.

The vehicle he’d gotten from Shikarabe as payment was a Telos Type 99—a faster and sturdier model than the 97, and with more functions geared toward desert traversal. It was similar in appearance to his old truck, but brand-new.

His powered suit was an ER2US model. This suit had an all-purpose scanner built in, and while it shared the same basic design and appearance as the ERPS (which hadn’t sold well due to poor reviews), its specs had been improved so that it would be better received.

His guns, which had been damaged beyond repair by the snake’s stomach acid, had also been swapped out for completely new ones, along with expensive modifications to improve their performance.

Decked out in his fresh-off-the-shelf equipment, Akira hardly looked any different from before, but his overall specs were now higher than ever. Moreover, Akira himself had grown—proven by how he'd been able to escape from the belly of a monster without Alpha's help, an experience that had also contributed to his growth. Through the bounty hunts, both Akira's gear and his own skill had received a significant boost.

"All right, let's head out!" Akira shouted from the driver's seat, all fired up.

Next to him, Alpha smiled as usual. *Yes, let's. Don't worry—even if you encounter another hypersynthetic snake, I'll make sure you don't get eaten this time.*

"Appreciate it. Well, even if something similar does happen, at least I know now I can handle it on my own."

Alpha gave him a small pout. *Are you saying you don't need me anymore?*

"Of course not! I need you so that I don't get into that situation in the first place! I have to have your support! Please continue to help me out!"

You can count on me! Alpha flashed a smile brimming with confidence, as though his words had cheered her up.

Akira grinned back and pressed his foot down on the gas. The truck sped out of the city and off into the desert wastes. There were no more bounty monsters roaming around, but the wasteland was still fraught with many other dangers. Today, just like every other day, countless hunters would brave these perils, risking their lives for the glory of the hunt.

And as one of those hunters, so too would Akira.

Side Story: A Matter of Luck

While Akira was waiting for the hundred million aurum's worth of new gear that he'd ordered from Shizuka to arrive, he received a call from Sheryl asking him to pay another visit to her base. Many hunters had perished during the bounty hunts, and Sheryl wanted Akira to make an appearance to show her underlings—and the rival gangs keen on stealing her turf—that he hadn't been one of them.

Akira wouldn't have gone out to the wasteland without being fully kitted out, but figured he would be fine just going as far as the slums. As he was getting ready to head out, however, he found himself conflicted.

"Hmm... Should I wear my powered suit this time?"

His suit was in bad shape: stomach acid had partially dissolved it during the battle with the hypersynthetic snake. The damage was so severe, in fact, that he'd instead opted to wear his unpowered everyday body armor when visiting Shizuka's shop to keep her from worrying needlessly. While a few scrapes or holes here and there wouldn't be a problem—such battle scars could even make him seem like a more distinguished hunter—he was worried that wearing his suit to Sheryl's in its present dilapidated condition could have the opposite effect.

If you do decide to wear it, I'd only do it as a bluff, suggested Alpha. *I wouldn't recommend fighting in that thing, even for self-defense.*

"Really? Even though I can still move in it?"

If you're just walking around, normally you'd be fine; but if you try to go all out in a suit this damaged, it's not going to function properly. And since it's a problem with the suit itself, there's only so much I can do to compensate. Unlikely though it might be, you wouldn't want to have your joints bent back so far they snap off, would you? And if I lowered the suit's output to make it safer for you to use, at your current level you'd actually be better off without it.

Recalling Shikarabe's story about how his friend's suit had malfunctioned, Akira decided to wear his body armor again. When he'd

finished fully preparing, he headed out. Since his vehicle had yet to arrive, he slung his pack over his shoulder and made the trek on foot.

As he reached the slums, Alpha warned, *Akira, heads up: you're being watched.*

Am I surrounded?

No, but they are *taking care to make sure you don't notice them.*

Akira thought for a moment. *Is that really so unusual, though? The whole reason Sheryl wanted me to come in the first place was to show her rivals that I'm still alive. Wouldn't it make sense they'd take notice?*

Perhaps you're right, perhaps not. Either way, their behavior is unusual, so just be careful.

Roger! Akira headed deeper into the slums, staying alert, until he arrived in front of Sheryl's base.

Oddly, Sheryl wasn't coming out to greet him. The entrance was also locked up tight. Now suspicious, he went on guard.

Akira, watch out. Something's not right.

I know. Drawing his AAH and A2D assault rifles, he had Alpha call Sheryl via his terminal. She didn't answer. He tried Erio next, just in case, but got the same result.

No good, huh? I wonder what's up.

What will you do, Akira? Head inside, or head home? Alpha asked.

Akira grinned boldly. *Home—that is, if you think it's too tough for me to handle even with your support.*

Then shall we go on in? Alpha replied, meeting his provocation with a confident grin. She modified Akira's vision so he could see through the building's walls. A pair of armed boys were lying in wait for an ambush, flanking the entrance on either side.

◆

A short time earlier, as Akira was making his way through the slums, a boy named Zebra inside Sheryl's base was talking to a man through his terminal.

"Is that really true?" Zebra asked.

"One hundred percent," said the man. "If you don't believe me, check

the footage I'm sending you right now and see for yourself. He's not in his truck, and he's not wearing a powered suit, right?"

On his screen, Zebra saw a video of Akira walking through the slums.

"Your boss asked Akira to show up so that she could prove to the other gangs that her protector was still hale and healthy—yet look how unprepared he is. That should tell you right there that he won't be able to keep you all safe."

Zebra grimaced. But the proof was right there—the man had to be telling the truth.

"Just think about it," the man continued. "If the other gangs simply want to bring you guys under their umbrella, then Akira alone might be good enough to protect you. But if they ever see you as a nuisance and move to crush you instead, it'll be a piece of cake—they'll only need to wait until Akira's absent."

Zebra thought back to when Guba's group had attacked—not to steal Sheryl's gang for themselves, but to destroy it altogether. His face twisted in anguish.

"Now do you understand? Akira may be your protector, but he's just one guy—he's limited in what he can do. Which is why this is your chance."

"No!" Zebra insisted. "There has to be another way to convince the boss!"

"There are other ways, of course. But do you really think they'll be enough to get her to reconsider?"

Zebra fell silent, which might as well have been tacit agreement.

"Akira's heading your way now," said the man. "You probably won't get another chance like this, so think hard before making your decision."

The line went dead.

"Dammit!" the boy cursed under his breath. Not just because of the decision he had to make, but because he already knew his answer.

◆

Minutes later, in her room, Sheryl gave Zebra a stern glare. "I told you, it's not even up for debate."

"But Boss, if we don't, we're doomed! It'd be one thing if you got Akira to live here with you, but you and I both know that'd be asking too much,

so—!”

“Doesn’t matter. If we enter under some other gang to gain their protection, they’ll come up with some harebrained excuse to steal our funds—*and* we will have lost Akira for nothing. Sure, we’re in a high-risk, high-return situation right now, but it’s much better than a low-risk, no-return one.”

“Then couldn’t we at least get Shijima to give us some backup?”

“That would be like telling him we’re incapable of surviving even with Akira’s protection, at which point we’d still have our funds and territory stripped from us.”

Sensing that Sheryl wasn’t going to budge, Zebra made his final appeal. “Is there really no other option, Boss?”

“No. I’ve made my decision, and it’s final.”

“All right, if that’s how it is, I understand. Sorry, Boss.”

Sheryl took this to mean he’d finally given up. “If that’s all, then get out of here,” she said. “Akira’s coming soon. Well, I suppose I could at least try and convince him to come visit more often...”

Her voice trailed off as Zebra aimed a pistol at her.

“Boss, I’m sorry—I really am. But please understand that I have to do this.” He looked miserable, but there was no going back now. “Start the operation!” he yelled.

On his signal, four boys entered the room. They were all among the strongest fighters Sheryl’s gang had to offer—only now, they were no longer on her side.

With Sheryl as a hostage, Zebra and the other four went to work occupying the rest of the base. Pressing a gun to Sheryl’s head quickly convinced the other gang members to cooperate and head to the top floor. There were, of course, other members skilled in combat that weren’t part of the coup, but with Sheryl’s life at stake they had no choice but to drop their weapons and comply.

Erio wore a look of disbelief. “Zebra, are you nuts?! What the hell are you thinking?!”

“Sorry, Erio. I thought about it for a long time and decided this was the only option. We’ve prospered a lot lately, and we’re only going to keep growing. Before long, even we and Akira combined won’t be enough to

protect us."

"Akira will be here any minute," Erio said. "And he'll kill you when he sees what you've done."

"I've prepared for that too," Zebra said. He hesitated, then handed a single gun to Erio. "Keep everyone else on the top floor. Don't let anyone come down—we won't hesitate to shoot anyone who does. Whether we're making the right choice will be clear soon enough, so you won't have to wait long for all of this to be over."

Sheryl signaled to Erio with her eyes and gave a small nod, so Erio decided to play along. Zebra and his group then disappeared down the stairs with Sheryl.

The instant they were gone, however, Erio swore under his breath. "Bastard!" And he felt powerless that cursing Zebra was the only thing he could do to resist him.

As Zebra and his allies led Sheryl through the base, she gave him an icy glare. "So, what's your grand plan here?" she demanded. "You really think the five of you will be able to beat Akira? Just how many do you think Akira was up against when he dealt with Syberg and his goons?"

Akira's slaughter of Syberg's gang of ex-hunters had been the original reason Sheryl had made a deal with Akira to begin with, and how she was able to use what remained of Syberg's gang to make her own. Which left Sheryl puzzled now—did these kids not realize that Akira would never lose against five armed boys from the slums?

"You'll understand when we get there," Zebra replied. He led her into the base's storehouse and gestured. "Here is our secret weapon."

Four storage cases sat on the ground. Sheryl was perplexed—she couldn't recall having ever seen the cases before, or imagine what Zebra planned to do with them.

Zebra pressed his gun against her temple once more. One of the other boys made a video call to someone on his terminal and held it up so Zebra and Sheryl showed on the screen.

Zebra's face was grave as he spoke to his contact. "There, I did it! Now open the cases like you promised!"

The man sounded amused over the terminal. "Roger that! Opening the locks now! Good luck!"

A tiny pop came from the storage cases, and their lids raised slightly. Zebra shot the other boys a look indicating they should open the cases up. When Sheryl saw their contents, she looked shocked—powered suits, plus weapons designed for fighting monsters. Now it was clear to her what Zebra's intentions were.

"Zebra! You— You sold out our gang so you could get your hands on these?!"

"It was better than having everything taken from us! Isn't that what you said when you sold part of our territory to Shijima?!"

Meanwhile, the other boys donned their powered suits. Then they marveled at how they could pick up the weapons—too heavy to lift normally—with ease.

"Holy crap! So this is what it's like to wear a powered suit!"

"No wonder Akira could level a building with this thing on!"

"It comes with a helmet too! We'll be totally protected!"

"Hell yeah! Regular bullets will just bounce right off!"

Zebra, the only boy not wearing one, ordered the other four to split up into two-man teams. One pair was to blockade the front entrance, while the second was to keep watch at the other exit.

Sheryl scoffed at Zebra. "Do you really believe those suits are going to help your odds against Akira? Akira's wearing one too, you know."

"Not today, he's not."

"What?" Sheryl couldn't hide her confusion.

Zebra showed her the video of Akira on his terminal. "This footage was taken right as Akira entered the slums. As you can see, he's on foot and not wearing a powered suit. According to my source, he apparently lost both his suit and his truck during the bounty hunts. He's wearing body armor, but that's all. He's apparently severely wounded as well, and those wounds have yet to heal. In that state, don't you think we have more than enough of a chance?"

Sheryl looked horrified. "Someone's gathered all that information on Akira?!"

"That's how badly they want our gang out of the picture!" Zebra replied angrily. "Enough that they're willing to go that far to spy on our protector!"

"Then why are you trying to kill him?!" Sheryl yelled. "What makes you think it's a good idea to wipe out the one who's keeping us safe?!"

“If he can’t handle the five of us, he has no business being our protector in the first place!”

Shocked, Sheryl was at a loss for words. “Zebra...” was all she managed to utter at last.

“That’s all we’re trying to find out, you know—whether Akira really is enough to protect us.”

He fell silent, and they said no more to each other. They both looked grim, however.

◆

Thanks to Alpha, Akira could clearly see through the wall to the two figures on either side of the entrance—as well as what they were wearing.

Say, aren’t those powered suits?

Alpha smiled as if there was nothing to worry about. *That’s right. And their weapons are meant for use against monsters, not humans. As long as you’re only wearing that cheap body armor, they could kill you in one shot, so try not to get hit. And don’t think you can heal up with medicine if you do—you’ll be dead before you ever get the chance.*

Don’t worry! Even if I was *wearing a powered suit, a headshot would kill me all the same, so I know the drill by now*, he said with a smirk. Then his expression grew deadly serious. “Hey, you two in there! You don’t look to me like security. If you’re not hostile, come out slowly with your hands up and tell me what happened here!”

On the other side of the wall, the boys looked stricken. “Shit, he knows we’re here! But how?!”

“He’s probably using one of those scanner things.”

“Dammit! Why couldn’t he have lost that too?! Guess we have no choice, then—let’s go!”

Realizing their original plan—shooting Akira from behind as he entered—was now no longer an option, they moved away from the wall, spun around, and fired at both the entrance door and the walls surrounding it. The guns—so massive they required powered suits to wield—turned the door into Swiss cheese.

But even though Akira wasn’t wearing a powered suit, he was still Akira, so they continued firing until they ran out of ammo. Before long, the

area outside was peppered with bullets as well, and by the time the gunfire stopped, the door was on the ground, reduced to splinters.

All was quiet. There was no gunfire in response. But stepping outside, they couldn't see Akira's corpse anywhere—only the deep scars the bullet storm had left on the surrounding slum neighborhood.

"I don't see him. Did he run off? What should we do? Go after him?"

"No, he probably headed to the other entrance. Let's go there too and meet up with the other team keeping watch."

"Sounds good!"

But the next instant, each boy saw the barrel of a gun through the visors on their helmets. Before their faces could even contort in terror, bullets blasted through their helmets, pulverizing their heads. Thrown backward, their corpses crumpled to the ground in the center of the base. Blood leaked from the helmets' bullet holes and edges, staining the floor crimson.

Akira looked at them and gave a small sigh. *Two down, I guess.*

Even before the two boys had begun to attack, Akira had circled around to the side of the building to avoid the gunfire. Thanks to Alpha's support, he could see their every movement, and he'd already ducked away by the time they'd left the wall. After evading their fire, he had observed them closely, and just as they'd stepped outside to check for his corpse, Akira had scaled the building and made his way to the alcove above the entrance.

Exiting the building, the boys had checked to the left and right—but had neglected to look up. Akira had leaped down, taken them by surprise, and dropped them at point-blank range.

Alpha, how many are left?

Three, I think. On the first floor I can see two, and there's one more upstairs who has his gun pointed at Sheryl.

Really? That's fewer than I thought. I figured we'd be up against a lot more, Akira replied, sounding a bit dissatisfied.

Fewer enemies means an easier job, so let's just be thankful that this time we were lucky.

Good point. Let's start with the ones on this floor. Maybe they're as weak as those two just now.

Yes. Let's hope this luck holds out.

I mean, it's me we're talking about here, so I wouldn't bank on it! But, well, I guess we can at least count it as a silver lining that I had the

foresight to make my guns usable without a powered suit.

The helmets the boys were wearing were tough enough to withstand normal bullets even from close range. But they couldn't protect against overpressure ammunition powerful enough to shatter the exoskeletons of Yarata scorpions. When *those* rounds were fired at point-blank range, even helmets would be useless as protection—they'd only be good for keeping the brains from splattering everywhere.

Normally Akira would have needed a powered suit to field such ammo, but the weapons he was currently wielding made it possible. After talking to Shizuka, he'd decided to upgrade the weapons he could use without a powered suit to make them stronger, and had purchased several high performance mods created by the "AAH lover" community. Both his AAH and A2D had now been fitted with expensive modifications.

As a result, the two weapons he was holding hardly resembled the way they'd looked when he'd first obtained them. The modded parts had been fashioned from an incredibly light material, so they could now be held just as easily as if he was wearing a powered suit. Extended magazines could now also be loaded in with no problem. Furthermore, by wearing an energy pack on his back, Akira could also generate a simple force field that shielded both his hand and his gun from the recoil. This allowed him to use overpressure ammunition as if they were normal rounds.

Of course, all of these modifications had cost a hefty sum, but he'd considered it worth it to bring his weapons to a level of performance that satisfied him. He'd canceled out his rotten luck—encountering enemies in powered suits when he wasn't wearing one himself—with the good fortune of having weapons strong enough to pierce that armor. Feeling satisfied, Akira continued to make his way through the base.

◆

When the boys waiting at the other entrance heard the echo of gunfire, their faces became grave, and they stood back-to-back, alert.

"What do you think it means?"

"Probably that Akira's here—and that he's fighting the other two."

"You think we should go help them?"

The second boy paused. "No, let's just see how this plays out for now. I

still hear guns, so I'm guessing it's our side. They want to make sure he's dead, after all. Of course, it's all well and good if that does the job, but if he's already fled the area while they're still shooting, he might be headed our way."

"Right."

They remained vigilant for a while longer until the gunfire finally stopped. They waited a little longer, but couldn't see any sign of Akira approaching, and smiled at each other in relief.

"Looks like he's not coming. Does that mean we won?"

"Well, our guys were wearing powered suits, after all. Even someone as strong as Akira couldn't take them down without wearing one himself."

Back in the Yonozuka Ruins, they'd both witnessed Akira collapse a building while wearing his powered suit, and so they had severely overestimated what a suit was capable of—and drastically underestimated what Akira was capable of without one. In fact, this was mainly why they'd accepted Zebra's invitation to join him in the first place.

"All right then, let's go rendezvous with the others."

"Bit of a shame, though. We could've taken care of him just fine if he'd simply come our way instead. Kinda feels like they stole our kill, don'tcha think?"

But their optimism and carelessness spelled their doom. With their guard down and their weapons lowered, they were sitting ducks when Akira leaped out from the shadows of the dark hallway and fired a volley of overpressure rounds. The boys never even had a chance to try out their new suits before the hunter mercilessly filled them full of holes.

Akira looked at the corpses on the ground, surprised. *Wow, that sure was anticlimactic... I guess that means it's not over, right?*

Alpha smiled. *While it's true that carelessness and confidence are two sides of the same coin, I think in this instance you can be confident. As you are, you're no match for them on your own—but thanks to my support, you know where they are and what they're doing at all times, right? If this feels anticlimactic to you, then you ought to be just as amazed at how incredible I am!*

Very true. You're amazing, Alpha! Incredible! Nothing gets by you! All right, now let's get going.

Akira's blatant, exaggerated praise and casual tone made Alpha frown in

displeasure. *Maybe it's just my imagination, but were those words of praise just now, shall we say, disingenuous?*

Sorry, but if it's praise you want, I'm not the right person to ask. Though I wasn't lying either—I really do think you're amazing. So just take what you can get for now, Akira said with a grin, hoping that she'd accept that excuse.

Alpha flashed her usual smile. *Guess there's no helping it, then. Let's go!*

Leaving that scene behind them, they headed up the stairs.

◆

Zebra was waiting above with Sheryl, still unsure whether he actually expected Akira to show up, when the latter finally walked in.

Akira entered the corridor normally rather than trying to conceal himself, for several reasons. His opponent was only armed with a pistol and was using Sheryl as a shield, pressing the muzzle of his handgun right into her temple. Akira could've shot Zebra unawares from the shadows, of course, but since he wasn't wearing his powered suit, Alpha couldn't correct his aim. And he wasn't confident enough in his own marksmanship to be sure he wouldn't accidentally hit Sheryl instead. Even if he ended up hitting only Zebra as intended, the impact might end up knocking Zebra's finger into his pistol's trigger.

So instead Akira boldly stepped into the corridor, heading straight for Zebra and Sheryl.

"Stop right there," Zebra commanded.

Akira stopped.

"There's four others down below. What happened to them?"

"They're dead," said Akira. "I killed them."

"I see." This news did not really surprise Zebra.

Sheryl spoke up. "You've lost, Zebra. Now put down your gun."

"No. Not yet."

"Are you saying you still think you have a chance?" she asked.

"That'll depend on you, Boss."

"Meaning?"

"You're Akira's girlfriend, right?" Zebra turned to Akira. "Throw down your weapons!" he yelled. "Unless you want your girlfriend to die!"

Sheryl's expression turned even more serious. She knew Akira would never discard his weapons for a reason like that. What would Zebra's next moves be? And how could she counter them...?

Then her mouth dropped open in utter shock, and she gasped.

Akira had dropped his guns.

Sheryl panicked and shouted, "Wh-What...? N-No, Akira, you can't! You can't get rid of those!"

But Akira ignored her and stared right at Zebra.

Zebra was also surprised—and so disappointed that he was furious. He had an almost pained look in his eyes, as if to say Akira had failed him. Then he glared at Akira. "So that's how it's gonna be, huh? Then—"

Zebra didn't think he was a particularly gifted marksman. However, he'd been in many shoot-outs in the slums, and those experiences had taught him what he was and wasn't capable of. From this distance, he was certain he could hit his mark. He gripped his gun tighter.

"Die!" He turned his pistol toward Akira's head and pulled the trigger.

The gunshot resounded throughout the corridor—but rather than hitting Akira, the bullet struck the wall behind where he'd been standing.

Zebra could barely utter "What the—?" before Akira slugged him with all his might.

Even while Akira had still held his guns, he'd already begun heightening his sense of time. As the world around him slowed to a crawl, he concentrated on his opponent so that not even the slightest movement went unnoticed. At the moment Zebra pulled his handgun away from Sheryl's temple, Akira focused his senses even more precisely and dashed toward Zebra. In the depths of concentration, his consciousness could track the very movement of Zebra's finger as it inched along, tensing the trigger. Then it was easy for Akira to anticipate first the trajectory of the shot from the direction of the muzzle, then the moment of fire from the movement of his opponent's finger—and he dodged to the side, avoiding the bullet.

Even with his predictions, Akira's movements still should've been impossible—his body shouldn't have been able to react in time. Yet Akira had done it.

Even without the aid of a powered suit.

It was often said that once you started wearing a powered suit, your own

physical abilities ceased to grow—once the wearer started relying on the suit's strength, there was no more need to improve their own. But what if you moved your body so quickly and aggressively that the suit's strength alone was insufficient? Since the human body's natural movements were far slower than the suit's, this would put a heavy burden on the body—which would actually end up strengthening the wearer.

Moreover, Old World medicine healed the body to Old World standards. Of course, simply taking it once wouldn't turn you into a superhuman; but repeated doses when your body was injured at the cellular level would certainly heal and strengthen those cells until they gradually became able to handle that burden. In this way, the body would ever so slightly inch closer to becoming superhuman. And even the expensive modern medicines that were manufactured using Old World technology could have a similar effect, albeit to a lesser degree.

So the stress on his body, combined with his constant intake of medicine, had improved Akira's physical performance to a degree that wouldn't have been possible with just regular training. And through the countless tough battles he'd faced since becoming a full-fledged hunter, he'd gotten used to moving around while injured and could now largely ignore the accompanying pain.

Pain served to keep someone from destroying their body through excessive strain. The more burden was put on the body, the more severe the pain, which typically made it impossible to push one's body to the limit. But since Akira had become used to extreme pain, he was now able to exceed those limits (aided in part by the significant amount of medicine he'd taken before confronting Zebra). And he was used to chaotic high-speed battles in his powered suit, so even if the lack of a suit had decreased what he could do physically, his mental ability was still sharp enough to keep up with those battles.

In a suit, lifting heavy objects became a simple task, but it was more difficult to move quickly and accurately. But now that Akira's ability had reached its current level, even without a suit he could attain speeds very near the limit of what was physically possible.

And so Akira had not only dodged Zebra's shot, he'd instantly closed the distance between them, snatched Zebra's gun, pulled Sheryl away, and sent Zebra flying with a punch. To Zebra and Sheryl, everything had happened

at lightning speed, but Akira had felt like he'd had ample time to get it all done.

Lying on the floor after Akira's punch, Zebra smiled bitterly. He no longer had the strength to stand.

"What the hell...?" he mumbled. "Is he...wearing a powered suit after all?"

Akira walked to his side and stared down at him. "Nah, I'm not." He unzipped his body armor slightly and showed him. His outfit was clearly *just* body armor—and he wasn't even wearing powered inner wear underneath. Zebra realized then Akira had discarded his weapons because the hunter knew he wouldn't even need them to kill Zebra.

"Seriously...? Just what are you?" Still wearing a bitter smile, Zebra managed to chuckle. "Hey, tell me something. How'd you get so strong? Not long ago, you were probably just like us—a slum kid living day-to-day trying to make ends meet, right?" Zebra's expression hung somewhere between admiration and disgust, but it was evident from the look in his eyes that, more than anything, he was curious. "And don't say you got that way just by going on relic hunts, because that's bullshit. We've gone on plenty. We cooperated as a team, prepared for them as much as we possibly could... And every time, we came back with nothing to show for it." He gave a self-deprecating smile.

"Well, if I had to say..." Akira, who had indeed been about to reply that his strength was due to fighting monsters in the ruins, now reconsidered a moment before answering. "I guess I was just lucky."

"Lucky, huh...? Well, there's no helping that, then," Zebra said with a rueful grin, yet he looked satisfied at Akira's answer. He certainly couldn't argue with such a response, since it was, in fact, the truth.

Sheryl finally recovered, picked up Zebra's gun from the floor, and pointed it at him. "Zebra, I want to know who you got those powered suits from. You're going to die here either way, but I might show a little more mercy if you talk."

Akira interjected, "Before that, Sheryl, can you tell me what happened here?"

"Um, well..." Sheryl hesitated. There was no getting around the fact that there had been an insurrection because her members doubted Akira's ability

to protect them, and her brain was working furiously trying to think of a way to tell him that wouldn't anger him.

But Zebra spoke up first. "Look, I'll tell you everything."

When he had finished and Sheryl had added her own account, Akira finally connected all the dots. Sheryl was nervously anticipating Akira's reaction, but Akira thought most of what Zebra said made sense: considering that he only rarely showed up at the base despite being their protector, it would stand to reason that a member might want to kill him to get more reliable support from another gang, no matter how strong he was. But he also thought something was strange about Zebra's story.

"Was all this really necessary, though?" he asked. "I mean, I saved Sheryl the last time she was kidnapped, and even killed everyone responsible, didn't I?" While he was technically the gang's protector, he was almost always in the background and ended up reacting to problems rather than preventing them. But after what he'd done, surely the other gangs wouldn't want Akira to target them if they could help it. Weren't his actions already enough of a deterrent?

But Zebra's response caught Akira completely off guard. "You're right. You did save the boss that time. But as a result, Valens died."

Sheryl explained to Akira that Valens had been a member of Sheryl's gang, killed back when Guba's group had attacked. She glared at Zebra. "So you thought that was just cause for mutiny?"

"It's not a matter of right or wrong. If Akira had been at the base back then, or even if we'd had any backup whatsoever to protect ourselves while he was absent, then perhaps Valens would still be alive. That's all." He gave a small smile. "No, I'll take that back—I *was* right in the end. It was simply a matter of luck, and I guess I was just unlucky."

He extended his hand toward the gun Sheryl was holding, grabbed it, and pressed it against his own temple. "That's right: we were just unlucky. Both me...and Valens."

He pressed the trigger down along with Sheryl's finger. A gunshot erupted through the corridor, and the bullet pierced through Zebra's cranium. His death was instantaneous.

If Zebra had any regret at all, it was only that he'd misjudged what Akira was truly capable of.

◆

After Zebra's death, Sheryl thanked Akira for coming to her rescue and went to tell Erio and the others that it was all over. She asked Akira to come along, but he refused. After retrieving his guns, he returned to Zebra's side and stared at the boy's corpse. Akira looked pensive and somewhat conflicted.

Alpha watched him curiously. *Something wrong? I don't see any reason to worry yourself over this corpse.*

Hm? Yeah, a little, I guess. Alpha, this is a shot in the dark, but I'll go ahead and ask—do you know where I can find whoever gave them these suits and put them up to this?

I do.

You do?! Akira was shocked—he hadn't expected that question to go anywhere. He wondered why in the world she knew that, and how she'd found out in the first place, but chalked it up to Alpha simply being Alpha and shelved the matter.

That so? Then take me to them.

After a bit of thought, Alpha decided not to stop him.

By the time Sheryl had brought Erio and the others with her to the scene, Akira was nowhere to be found. In his place was a short message saying that since his job here was done, he was heading out. As Sheryl worried about how much the incident might have upset him, she fulfilled her role as the boss of her gang and set to work keeping everything that had happened under wraps.

◆

In a room at the base of another slum gang, a man named Yazan clicked his tongue.

"Damn! They failed, huh? Guess this hunter Akira is tougher than I thought."

The man standing next to him spoke. "Or perhaps your intel was bad?"

"Sure, it was a little vague, but everything I told that kid was the truth. Akira almost died during the bounty hunts and did lose his gear—that's a

fact. Although I did assume the part about his wounds not being fully healed." Yazan had goaded Zebra into attacking Akira, blending fact and fiction together to create a story which would spur Zebra to action, and even issuing him a set of powered suits for this purpose.

"But you know, those powered suits were pretty high-spec," the other man said. "Wasn't it a waste to hand over such good gear to a bunch of brats?"

"Well, I had my reasons, but it's nothing you need to worry about."

"But they still failed in the end. Won't this present a problem?"

"It'll be fine. I would've preferred for them to succeed, but there was also a reason I chose now to make a move." Since Akira had been attacked by the gang he was supposed to be protecting, Yazan explained, he'd surely regard Sheryl and her gang with suspicion and reservations from here on out. And now that Sheryl knew what had motivated Zebra, she'd be forced to rethink her current defense situation, creating an opening for other gangs to approach her. Finally, because one of their own had attacked Akira, Sheryl's gang wouldn't feel they could count on his protection anymore. In short, she'd need some form of security and so would be more willing to compromise.

"True, we'd be in trouble if we didn't let each other know before we move in," he added. "Sheryl's gang is technically still in cahoots with Shijima currently, so we have to be careful and patient."

As a mere gang member, Zebra couldn't have known any of this, which was one reason Zebra had jumped the gun. Of course, Yazan's facade of amiability and the information he'd fed him had played a decent part as well.

"For now, let's just watch and see what happens," Yazan concluded. "We shouldn't have to wait long for a rift to form between Sheryl and Akira, and that's when we'll make our move. No need to hurry."

As Yazan continued chatting with the other gang bosses in the room, one of his subordinates poked his head in. "Boss, there's a guy downstairs. Says his name is Akira. It's probably *him*."

"Say what?" Yazan's face twisted in confusion.

After some hesitation, Yazan allowed Akira into his base. Akira had told the subordinate he wanted to meet their boss, and that for the time being he

hadn't come as an enemy. Judging by his tone, if they'd refused to let him in, he would probably have entered by force. And if he really did intend to put up a fight, it would be more advantageous to have him inside the building where all the gang's fighters were already gathered than outside at the entrance.

For all these reasons, Yazan had reservations about immediately turning Akira away. But perhaps the biggest reason of all was that Zebra couldn't have known that Yazan had been the one behind all of this. Yazan had made sure to cover his tracks—even if the boy had talked, he would've mentioned the leader of some other gang instead. And even if Akira had somehow sussed him out and this visit was doubling as a warning, so long as Yazan played dumb, Akira would be unable to learn anything more. Yazan remembered that back when Akira had similarly gone to Shijima's base, in the end he'd made a deal with Shijima and left. So ultimately Yazan decided it wouldn't be a problem to invite him in.

After gathering some armed subordinates in the room with him, he gave the order to let Akira enter. Of course, he'd told them to keep their weapons out of sight, but their main purpose was to get Akira to realize he was outnumbered.

When Akira entered the room, he didn't look upset, which alone confirmed to Yazan that Akira had no intention of fighting him.

Just as I thought. He inwardly breathed a sigh of relief.

"So, what business does Sheryl's protector have with me?" Yazan asked.

"Were you the one who made a deal with Zebra and got him to attack me?"

"Huh? I have no idea what you're talking about." Yazan's acting was impeccable. He naturally assumed the demeanor of one who was being accused of something they genuinely knew nothing about.

But Yazan was only human.

"Answer the question. Were you, or weren't you? If you really don't know what I'm talking about, then just say you had nothing to do with it."

After clicking his tongue as though he was dealing with someone spouting complete nonsense, Yazan answered, "It wasn't me."

Alpha?

He's lying.

Yazan's head exploded. An overpressure round blasted away more than

half of his skull, scattering his brain across the room.

Akira had drawn and fired his weapon in a single instant, with zero hesitation. He'd already set his mind on killing Yazan the moment Alpha informed him who'd been egging Zebra on; but just to make sure, he'd still wanted to meet Yazan face-to-face and ask him directly. Once Alpha, who was able to detect lies from humans, had confirmed it again, there had been no more reason to delay.

Everyone else in the room froze with shock. But they recovered quickly and aimed to kill.

"You bastard!" yelled the one who'd reacted fastest.

He was the next to die.

After that, they began dropping like flies in order from most to least dangerous, as determined by Alpha. Taken completely by surprise, Yazan's underlings were slaughtered one after another. But not all at once—some fought back, and they were too concerned with keeping themselves alive to worry about friendly fire. In no time at all, the room was filled with a chaotic cross fire.

But no one ended up hitting Akira. Controlling his sense of time, he had Alpha mark the enemies' lines of fire in red; and thanks to the medicine he'd previously ingested, he could ignore the pain and strain on his body from avoiding every single bullet.

The men gathered in the room were armed, but their main job was to intimidate others into thinking twice about starting a fight, so they weren't skilled enough to create a curtain of gunfire impossible for Akira to avoid. By simply paying attention to the red lines, Akira could slip through their shots with relative ease—and even if someone tried to shoot him from behind, Alpha could make him sense their location and the direction of their shot via telepathy.

No one could catch him unawares.

The overpressure and armor-piercing rounds loaded into each of his modded assault rifles made short work of the enemy's defenses, and since he could now use extended magazines, the continuous stream of bullets littered the room. So much blood was spilled that the grisly scene easily qualified as a massacre, dyeing the walls, floor, and ceiling a dark red.

By the time the gunfire stopped, the only ones left standing were Akira (who'd brought about this calamity), those who Alpha had calculated posed

so little threat they weren't worth killing, and those who were so terrified they'd lost the will to fight.

Reloading his weapons just in case, Akira approached one from this last group. "Hey, you!"

The man yelped at being addressed, but Akira's expression remained neutral as he warned casually, "If you don't wanna fight me, run away as quick and as far as you can. Reinforcements will be coming soon, and I'm not so confident a marksman that I'd promise not to accidentally hit you in the fight."

The man nodded eagerly and dashed out the door for dear life.

For some time afterward, Akira remained there, engaging any reinforcements who showed up at hearing the commotion. He killed anyone who attacked him and let the ones who didn't go free. Once no one else was fighting back, he made a sweep of the entire base and chased the remaining members out.

When all this was done, he finally sighed. "That ought to do it."

He then took out his terminal and called Sheryl.

◆

A truck was parked in front of Yazan's base. Children from Sheryl's gang were hard at work carrying everything out of the building and loading it onto the truck. Money, weapons, furniture, clothing—they took it all. Even the clothing and gear they'd looted from the corpses inside went on board.

The corpses themselves, however, did not. As the children worked to get everything out, their faces blanched at the gruesome scene inside.

"Did Akira really do all this?"

"Apparently. If what Erio said is true, this used to be the base of the gang boss that was backing Zebra."

"Yeah, but isn't this still, like, kind of insane?"

"We're talking about someone who killed a man and dragged his corpse to his boss's base, remember?"

"O-Oh yeah, good point!"

Having confirmed once more that their gang's patron had a few screws loose, they stopped chatting and focused on their work.

Sheryl was over by the side of the truck, explaining to Shijima via her terminal that they'd taken over Yazan's territory after Akira had destroyed his gang in revenge. Then she made Shijima an offer to purchase Yazan's territory from her.

"I see. Yes, I'd be interested," he replied. "We'll have a proper discussion about the price later. You're really okay with handing it over?"

"Yes. Leaving it unclaimed would just cause other gangs to fight over it, after all. You can have the building too, once we're done here."

"Sounds good. It's a deal, then."

Sheryl was inwardly relieved that the territory was no longer her problem. A gang of her size would never be able to manage the territory of a medium-level syndicate, and she could easily foresee rival groups "offering" to take it off her hands by force.

"By the way, what did Yazan do to you guys?"

"Oh, various things. Unlike your people, however, they didn't want to settle the matter peacefully, that's all. If you feel differently, I look forward to continuing our amicable partnership." Implicitly, Sheryl was warning, *If you try to lowball us on the territory or settle this any way other than peacefully, Akira will come after you next.*

"Noted," he said.

And with that, she secured the deal.

Akira was on the roof of the building, staring out at the scenery before him. He'd wanted a good vantage point in case the gang's remnants decided to come after him again, but since most of Yazan's armed forces had been in the base, he'd worried for nothing, and now he was just killing time.

Alpha felt Akira's behavior lately had been unusual, and decided to pry some more. *Akira, why did you go out of your way to destroy that gang?*

Just an accident, he replied.

Zebra and his conspirators had rebelled, but if this had been *just* a rebellion, Akira probably would've simply killed them and considered the case closed. However, the reason Zebra had even entertained the idea in the first place was that his friend had died back when Guba's group attacked. Once Akira found this out, he'd felt that the entire incident had been his fault, starting from when he'd roped Sheryl's gang into collecting relics at

Yonozuka. So he'd tried to make up for it by killing the instigator Yazan as well. And after killing the boss, he'd had no choice but to destroy the whole gang as well.

But Akira didn't explain any of this in detail to Alpha—not even through telepathy. So Alpha determined that it really had just been an accident.

Hey Alpha, he said, changing the subject. *Do you think that Zebra guy really intended to kill me?*

I think he would have.

Really?

In the dark as to why Akira would ask such an obvious question, not to mention doubt her response, Alpha elaborated, *At least, I'm certain he was shooting to kill. However, it's possible he thought he might miss.*

I see. Akira fell silent. Back when he'd dropped his guns, he'd sensed something like disappointment in Zebra's expression and couldn't figure out why. And when Akira had defeated him, Zebra had seemed almost *happy*, and that puzzled him as well.

Sheryl appeared next to him. "Oh, this is where you were!"

"Hm? Yeah, I just needed some fresh air."

Sheryl filled Akira in on how the gang was doing after the incident, and after some hesitation, asked, "Um, how did you know that Yazan was here pulling the strings behind Zebra?"

"Don't ask."

"Oh... Okay." She hoped that Akira hadn't killed him due to a misunderstanding or a wrong guess, but given his response she had no choice but to drop the matter. Since it was Akira, she told herself, he must've had some sort of proof, and changed the subject. "Anyway, you really are amazing, wiping out this gang all by yourself without a powered suit. In fact, I'm kind of curious how you got so strong. Is it just raw talent? Hard work?"

She was hoping to flatter Akira in this way, but Akira remembered that Zebra had asked him something similar, and gave the same response.

"Well, if I had to say, I guess I was just lucky."

"L-Lucky?"

"Yeah. It was all a matter of luck."

Well, *that* wasn't something she could praise, and for a time, Sheryl was at a loss for words.

Meanwhile, Akira reflected on what he'd just said. The biggest reason for his growth was Alpha. Zebra had also claimed to explore ruins; but he hadn't met her. Akira knew it hadn't been hard work or effort that had gotten him to his current level. Before running to Alpha, he'd been struggling day-to-day simply to stay alive, so he knew how far hard work alone would have gotten him.

And yet, Akira didn't feel like he'd worked hard enough to earn his encounter with Alpha. So when he looked back on everything he'd been through since then, he could only reply that he'd been incredibly lucky.

Then he remembered Zebra's last words. "And he," he mused, "was unlucky."

"Um, who are you muttering about?"

Akira hesitated. "No one. Don't worry about it."

Since his response hadn't been "Don't ask" this time, Sheryl sensed that Akira was feeling conflicted, but she didn't inquire further so as not to provoke him. Instead she turned to another topic, and her look grew stern.

"Akira, I need to tell you something. Back when they were holding me hostage and you dropped your weapons for my sake, I was honestly really happy. But don't do that again, okay? If something would happen to you, I'd—"

"Oh, that? Nah, I only did that 'cause I thought it would be a safer bet. Don't count on me doing it again."

Sheryl had put on a pleading expression to try to convince him, but at his matter-of-fact reply, her expression hardened instead. "O-Oh, really?"

"Yeah. I mean, back when you were kidnapped, I crashed my own truck directly into the enemy's vehicle, right? That was so they wouldn't have time to use you as a hostage. I couldn't have them pull the same stunt on me as before," he explained, pleased with himself that he'd come up with a good excuse.

"O-Oh, really?" she repeated. It took everything she had to maintain her smile.

◆

Deep in a mansion belonging to one of the two largest syndicates ruling the slums, the information broker Viola was, true to her trade, handing over

intel to a client. “Here’s what you requested. Is it to your liking?”

The man leafed through the contents. “Hmm... Even though they were just a bunch of failed ex-hunters, he wiped them all out on his own, and without a powered suit? That’s no small feat. I’d heard some crazy rumor that he’d killed a bounty monster from the inside after it swallowed him—but if he’s this strong, maybe it isn’t so crazy after all.”

“Would you like me to look into that as well?”

“No, for now this is enough.”

“Very good. If you don’t mind, though, can you tell me why you went so far as to purchase a set of powered suits just to investigate a mere hunter?” she inquired.

“If he was weak enough to be killed by a bunch of kids in such gear, then it wouldn’t matter if he turned out to be an enemy, and he’d have no business being our ally. That’s all I wanted to see.”

“*That’s* why you spent so much?! Those suits looked rather expensive.”

But the man grinned cheerfully at her surprise. “Such a price is a drop in the bucket for us. A minor expense, considering the battle to come.”

“Oh? Intriguing. So the next battle’s going to be a large one?”

“You could say that.” The man’s expression grew serious, and the look in his eyes became sharp and imposing. “And it goes without saying, but we’ll be the ones to win. I trust we’ll have your support as well?”

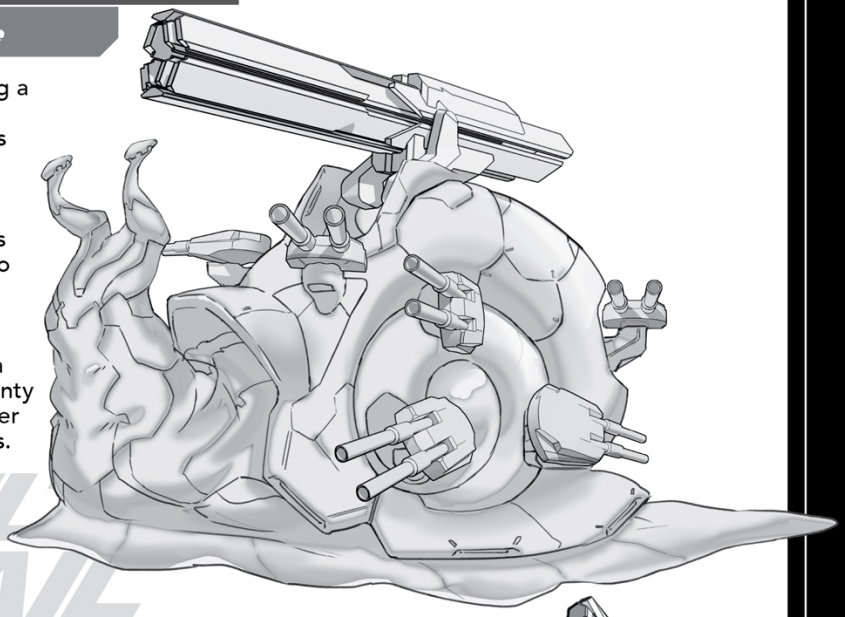
Viola dismissed the gang leader’s intimidating glare with an alluring smile. “That depends on what you’re paying. I trust you won’t disappoint me?”

“Hmph. Fine.” The man knew firsthand just how ruthless the woman in front of him could be, and so that smile of hers only put him on high alert.

Monster Guide

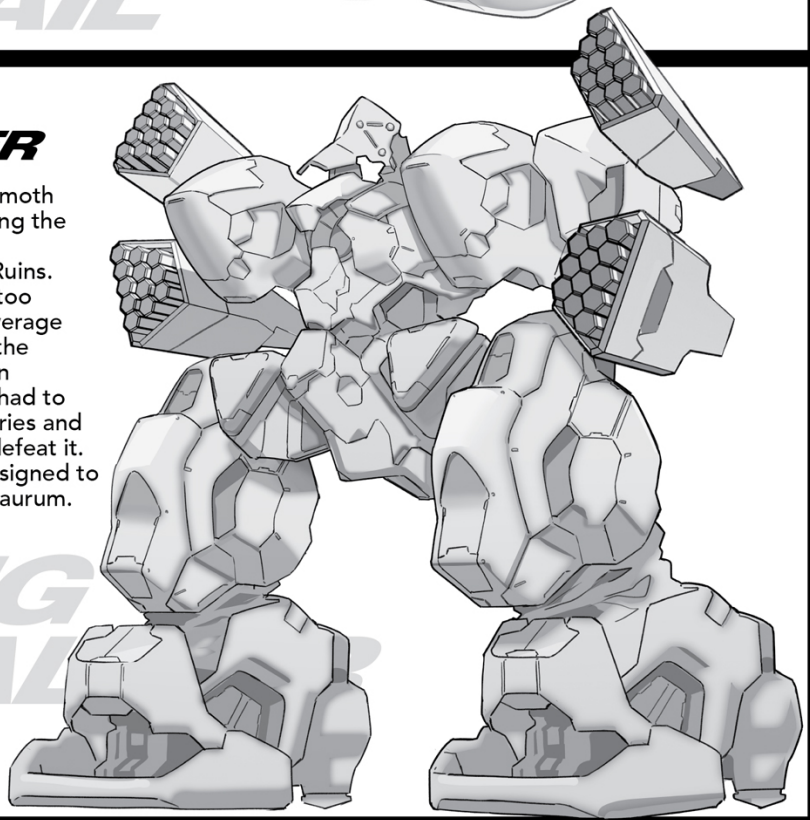
MULTIGUN SNAIL

A monster resembling a snail the size of a two-story building. Its metallic carapace is covered in endless artillery, with which it relentlessly pulverizes its enemies. Thanks to the high-energy laser fired from the main cannon on its back, the creature earned a 1.5-billion-aurum bounty in the end, even higher than the tankrantula's.

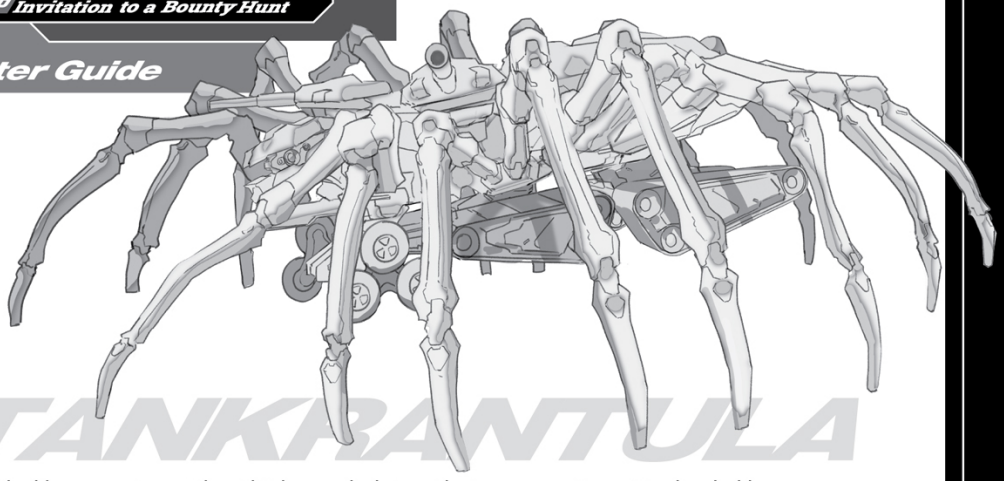


BIG WALKER

A mechanical behemoth that appeared during the reactivation of the Yonozuka Station Ruins. Because it was far too powerful for the average hunter, in the end the hunter syndicates in Kugamayama City had to set aside their rivalries and band together to defeat it. The final bounty assigned to it was three billion aurum.



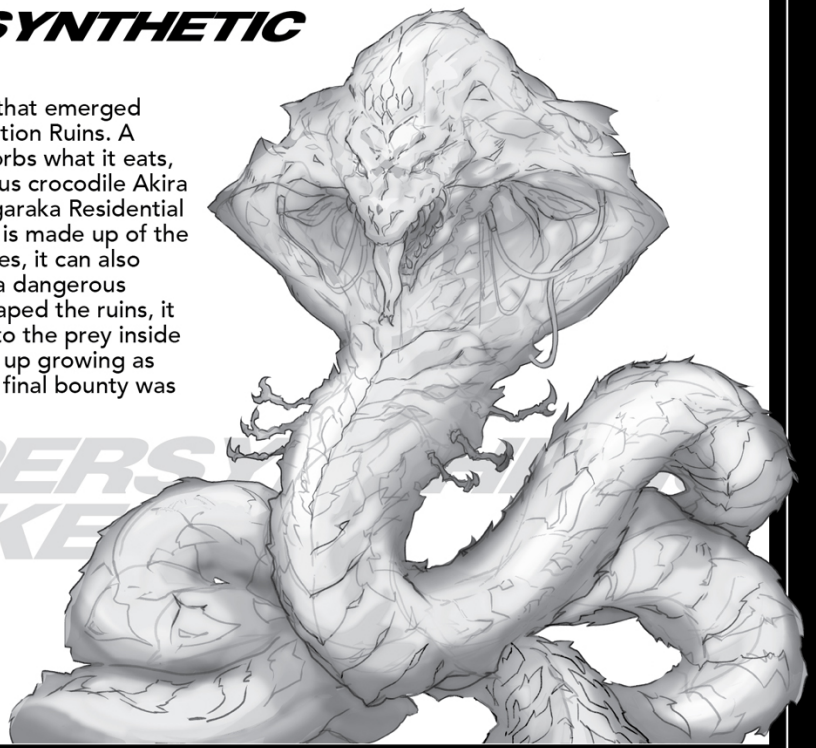
TANKRANTULA



A spiderlike monster with a thick exoskeleton that encases its entire body like armor. Two large gun turrets are perched on top. With sixteen legs and the tank treads attached to its lower body, it traverses the wasteland at high speeds. Even after being designated as a bounty monster, it continued to grow until it was as tall as a three-story building. Its high intelligence and its ability to release many smaller tankrantulas from its belly when in danger make it a formidable foe indeed. The bounty placed on it ultimately reached eight hundred million aurum.

HYPERSYNTHETIC SNAKE

A serpentine monster that emerged from the Yonozuka Station Ruins. A mutant species, it absorbs what it eats, much like the gluttonous crocodile Akira encountered in the Higaraka Residential District. Since its body is made up of the various prey it consumes, it can also regenerate, making it a dangerous opponent. Once it escaped the ruins, it was no longer limited to the prey inside the tunnels and ended up growing as tall as a skyscraper. Its final bounty was two billion aurum.



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Rebuild World III
Part Two
Invitation to a Bounty Hunt

"Don't drag me down if you know what's good for you!"
"Sure, whatever."
Togami had gotten into Akira's truck because Shikarabe told him to. But the veteran hunter hadn't given him a reason—merely told him to shut up and comply. In his own mind, Togami placed himself on a pedestal, so he'd assumed there had to be some significant reason behind the decision. But his new partner didn't look skilled at all.
Rebuild World XVII

> Episode 003

Part Two Invitation to a Bounty Hunt

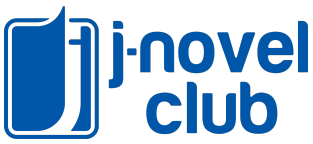
Character

> YANAGISAWA

One of Kugamayama City's top brass.
A mysterious man who also has secret ties to the nationalists.

> TOGAMI

A rookie hunter in Druncam, lauded as the "rising star of Katsuya's detractors."
His hunter rank is 27.



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REBUILD WORLD Vol. III Part 2: The Buried Ruin
by Nahuse

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